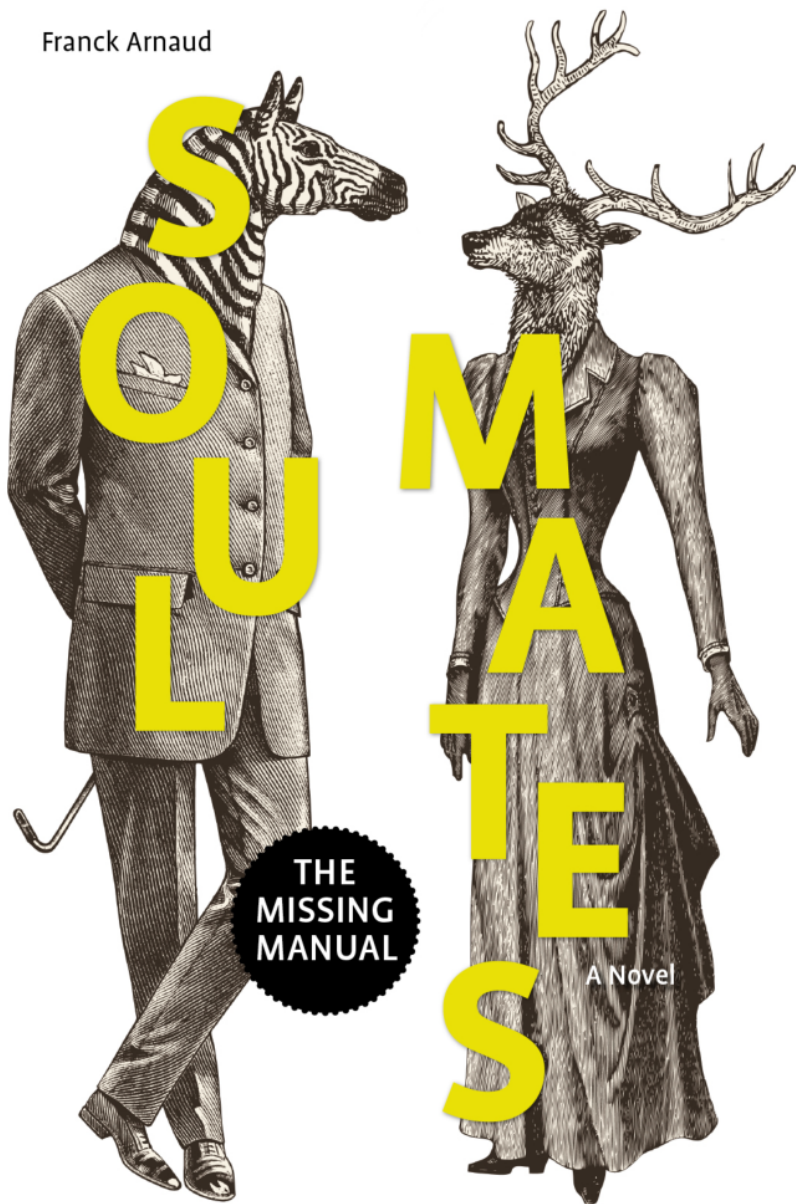


Franck Arnaud



Soul Mates: The Missing Manual

Franck Arnaud

The Duke

“It’s as if I had a computer in my head”, I explain to Henry, “as I scan a room, or the street. It’s like there’s one of those yellow pop-ups appearing near each face, as my mental mouse pointer hovers over them, with a label, like ‘too old’, ‘too fat’, ‘too old and too fat’, ‘cute but thick’, or ‘man’. My brain is constantly evaluating the shag potential of every entity that comes into view – with a same species filter though, it doesn’t work with elephants or giraffes, though arguably one doesn’t meet that many giraffes on the streets of London. I just can’t keep thinking about how desirable or not the world around me is. Even when they’re facing backwards, the popups then appear on legs or bottoms, or general form, then sometimes I’ve got that need to see a front or side view to refine the assessment, or completely revise it, as a perfectly good backside could be comprehensively ruined by a change of angle; and let’s face it, it’s hard to conduct even the most fleeting of relationships without ever facing one’s opposite number.”

“Man, you’re gross” interjects Henry, preventing me from having my lecture on mating obsessiveness science – surely it is science – go on as long as a Castro speech. “I only get anywhere near that sort of thought when I’ve had a beer or I’m in the mood” I remark. He explains how he can think of other things, even when his mind is on idle and not particularly working on a heavy foreground task, like finding a toilet when you have an urge to pee. I express my bemusement, and a tortuous argument later, we still can’t decide which of us is more representative of mankind.

We are sitting in an East London pub, very close to hipsterland, but it somehow hasn’t yet been taken over. It is, like its regulars and the fallen letters off the sign on its side, past its peak, which makes it endearing. Pleasant for a while, yet not quite homely. Not really suitable for a date, but as it happens Henry had a date here last week, he tells me after our stalemate. He had set up a meeting earlier in the day, but the girl almost cancelled with an urgent request to go to a private view at seven. Can’t she have known earlier? Whatever, some frantic text exchange later he was able to relocate here, which was on her way to the event and on his way from work. An artist of some kind. “They’re trouble”, I say. I used to have massive positive prejudices about artists – interesting, wild, rock’n roll, but the reality

is often more mundane. They might be good at some craft or other but that doesn't make them interesting. Some artistic skills are as much correlated to being a broadly interesting person as the skills required to be a car mechanic, who could well be totally creative in their way to get that old banger to start. So there are a lot of boring people with talent, but to be an interesting human being is not a talent. Then there's all those that are not even very good at that craft, and when you talk to them they tell you they're a painter, as a statement of fact, but later in the conversation you realise they really teach and, despite being in their mid-thirties, they only ever sold two paintings, for not much, and at this pace the teaching job might well last for a lifetime or two. Not that economic success is an unassailable measure of artistic quality, but if nobody, neither commercial nor art funding bodies, nor private collectors are interested in your work, and that after ten or fifteen years of trying, if you started from art school in your twenties; let's face it, there's a fair chance you're actually just terrible. Which would be crap to tell them, we do have manners, but it has a tendency to make social interaction impossible. Icing on the cake, their ego is both big – they're creative genius – and fragile – they might suspect, if subconsciously, that they're just not very good rather than unacknowledged by a world failing to appreciate the deep meaning of their mediocre work. Mind you, successful artists are probably not much easier, having to handle fame and glory, which when hypersensitive might easily lead their partners on the long and lonely road to domestic social work.

“Give her a break,” says Henry, “where I am in my story she has just sat down, bit early in a relationship for a deluge of prejudices, isn't it?” He reminds me of the girl I met recently who was so obsessed with her Treasury job – on the minister floor – that she could only talk about the intricate details of pension regulations for residual government quangos that take over the liabilities of parent organisations that have fallen victim to political whims. “OK, you win, we'll take the stylish tormented East London failed painter-teacher anytime over that.”

He goes on describing the woman, an installation artist – hum, no comment – tall, slim, nice elongated shape, face more cute than not, if a bit blessed with wrinkles. Would be well preserved for a 42 year old, but he says she advertised 35 on her online profile. “Maybe she's smoked a lot in her life”, I suggest. Yes, you can never know, and she was the minus five years type. He's sure the difference between real and displayed age is largely predictable from personality types. I concur and suggest he prepares a form to collate such info, to hand out at the end of dates, all in the name of the advancement of the social sciences.

They had a pleasant, if frosty, conversation. He says he couldn't quite get into

(liking) her. Nor into her, impossible time of day as well for that; I recommend he sees her again at closing time to see what that feels like then. I ask if he'll be seeing her again but he can't be sure he'll be arsed, sort of not liking her enough to make an effort. However, he would reply if she did. But they never do, or so rarely. So much for feminism and sex equality. The girls should make exactly half the steps, and every other time be the one who makes the first move. Problem is we as blokes start to behave like that it's a certain route to celibacy. It's a paradox that the ultimate feminist behaviour for a man that is not struck by the right kind of lightning – love at first sight in mutually agreeable circumstances – is to become a catholic monk, and dedicate, as they do, their life to masturbation.

He adds that objectively she's fairly cool, but yet leaves him cold, despite not being able to point out a rational explanation, or even a hint thereof. Case in point: how the date ended; “funny one,” he continues, he walked with her to the gallery event she was going to, in Bermondsey, that was more like a performance in fact, so harder to get in. She had a couple of friends waiting for her outside, late forties, short stocky hairy blokes, both of them, Hawaiian shirts, both of them too. The gaydar was on maximum signal, they looked like a fully formed couple. Another problem with most artists, for them this time and an advantage for us, the people they know are girls or gay. Tough life for the straight girl, so they end up online, dating... us. Anyway, gay blokes are not the point of this tale, she had a final friend coming in, who was late, and phoned for directions. During the phone conversation he overheard that the lost friend was called Barbara. His date gave her somewhat confused directions, and then got into the venue with the gay bear couple, who were getting impatient about missing the start of the event. So he kisses (cheek, regulatory neutral dating procedure) her goodbye, and walks back towards Tower Bridge along an underpass under the railway. Nearly out, a girl, right age, right looks, right attitude, one of those ‘not love at first sight but something like it’ kind of vision, asks him for directions. To the venue the date is attending. Everything matches, it must be that Barbara; so he asks her “Are you Barbara? It's that way at the end of the tunnel on your right, your friends are waiting for you there.” The girl, looking totally bemused, but in a hurry, leaves.

Spooky one, and I ask if he did anything else about it? No, and it's a hard situation, finding a way to turn the encounter into something, even a mere debriefing appointment, on the spot, within the 30 seconds the whole thing lasted would require a sense of repartee that's beyond most mere mortals, let alone earthy Henry. But then contacting the date to ask if her cute friend is single, and possibly interested in rewarding such a well informed guide, would be a bit rude. So it'll stay there, though Henry spent the last day or so thinking of a possible way around the issue, to no avail.

I get us another drink after this epic tale. As I wait, I analyse the waitress' generous breasts – she's a bit round, looks not too clever by half, but not unpleasant either. She does have a narrowish bottom relative to the top of her legs, which touch at the groin, an anti-fetish of mine, but that gets lost in the dark depth behind the bar, unlike the fascinating frontal assets. She must be from Poland, or Norwich maybe; which is almost the same thing, there's probably some sort of continuum there and some time during a pre-glacial age it may be that Gdansk and Norwich were probably both in Poland, and then shifted away and got somehow stuck into the east face of the British Isles, I tell Henry, who tells me it's not even eight and I'm already plastered. Yes, all right, I'm a lightweight.

It's a Monday evening and we were supposed to have a quick one after work, but we're both getting a bit tipsy so after some more deliberation we leave our ageing working class hangout, on a quest for London adventures. Not gonna be easy, it's the worst day of the week. I remember a place that has regular gigs on Monday, up in Clerkenwell, big pub with tiny basement, but often good acoustic gigs and a nice indie crowd. So revealing of London that more space is allocated to drink than to culture, I remark. Henry responds that it's actually not bad for one establishment, if you added up all cultural spaces in London and then compared that to all the restaurants, it'd probably be a tiny proportion. So here we have a sophisticated, busy metropolis, with all the societal and technical advancements, at great expense of effort, or at least time sitting in offices, fireworks of sophistication and human ingenuity, producing unprecedented riches, that people spend on... eating. It's a bit of fun to eat retorts Henry, but acknowledges that it sounds like a lot of effort expended in a rather vain direction. Even accounting for everything else the economy produces, the situation does not seem pretty. We should be university lecturers I suggest, you can probably get a lot of student lay with some effort. Yes, I reply, but the collateral damage management must take effort. It did work well in that Finnish film where the guy gets a new shag at the end of year party every single time without fail. "Once a year only!" worries Henry. Yes, not quite worth it, I concur. And he murders his wife accidentally at the end. Bit sad all that. "Eh you don't make happy films when you're from Finland, it's dreary there", says Henry, quite rightly. But the place is fairly well kept, they have telephones and stuff, and I spent a very jolly evening haunting an empty Helsinki that had been left to myself because of some sporty event or other.

Some sport of sorts, with a green background, must be snooker or football, or golf – I confuse them all these games with a white ball on a green background – is playing on the flat screen in the almost empty pub I mistakenly insisted we must stop at for a refreshment stop on our way to the venue, which is a longish trot away. Really I could have chosen a less dire

place. At the bar a couple of girls – in their twenties probably, one not very attractive, the other not very attractive, but in a different way, neither repugnant, and with youth on their side – try to find the cocktail menu. Henry tries to explain, in his unbroken English, that it's a pub not a cocktail bar. Difficult to get the point across as they only speak broken English, and Henry doesn't; but it does emerge they're indeed tourists from eastern Europe. I think about it; I know a cocktail bar round the corner that's not half bad and that they might vaguely like, but somehow don't find a turn of conversation to say so, and just keep my nose in my drink. After we depart from the place, Henry says he thinks we could have worked that out. Pity. On an intoxication night, we meet two non-repugnant entities of female gender seemingly on their own with nothing much to do, get talking to them without much trying, and we do nothing!

Finland comes back to us as we walk through Baltic Street. That part of London is, perhaps like the town in its entirety, both hard to like and hard to dislike. Council estates to the north, not badly kept, with the odd unappreciated architectural effort, like the low lying Lego blocks near St Lukes or the triangular towers, which would make a nice t-shirt motif from above, with inhabitants that seem to survive reasonably well, and then the middlingly agreeable patchwork of small buildings, gently agreeable as well, the best of which got repurposed for the storage of media types. No middle ground though, you're either working in a shop or on the dole, or for Wallpaper or for a bank but you also own a guitar (thankfully for your neighbours without too much time to play it). And these crowds do not mix.

We finally arrive at the gig venue, at which there is no gig, but there are drinks. Unusually airy, fairly tastefully decorated if probably run by some corporation or other, the pub has a pleasant crowd. Some kids, some grown ups, most of them may not have got the Wallpaper job yet, but may have applied for it. Some after work. Henry needs to smoke. We go outside. A group of four people is on the other side of the open window. I can't quite fathom who they are. Couples? Evening class crowd? One of them comes out for her own cigarette. "Hi. Did you also hope there was a gig?" I ask. She's Austrian. A cardiologist. Pleasantly cute. She's quite into Henry, from the look of it, and as they chat along, her friend starts talking about the place of aristocracy in British society to me, thinking Henry looks like he could be someone who's been assigned a country house but can't afford to maintain it. Henry lives in a two-up two-down terrace somewhere north of the Circle Line that I can't locate quite precisely, and has no manor house in his background that I know of.

Unfortunately my amateur sociologist is nothing like Henry's medic. Danish, early thirties or even late twenties, fairly round, could perhaps be an item

with a diet and some alcohol. We prattle about how divided the UK is class-wise, but then remark that Henry is a counterexample of this, having both manners and no manor. The discussion becomes more and more fuzzy as Henry gets closer and closer to the doc. Sitting on a bench is perfect positioning. She's almost drooling over him, as much as she had earlier dismissed me, as if I were another generation, despite Henry and I being approximately the same age. Time for kissing, Sir, I think; but can't really articulate it in the circumstances, nor is there any prop-man to walk past with a big sign saying "Kiss Now!" We still don't know though if the guys at the table, deep in discussion with each other, are assigned to the girls or just mates from the evening class.

The doc has gone in and out again, studying with great interest an abandoned office chair with a broken wheel sitting on the pavement opposite. "No, I don't think it's useful enough for your room", I shout. After some confusion her and half her group disappear in a separate direction, it probably was an evening class crowd after all. The Dane is still chatting, about Kierkegaard now, who was a really cute boy she argues. We pointlessly invite her for another drink, hoping she'll say no as we wouldn't really want to get stuck with her for the rest of the night. Thankfully she declines, possibly flattered but hard to tell, and departs towards, predictably, her bicycle. She's more sober than us, fortunately.

I reprimand Henry for his outrageous failure to make a move on a perfectly well formed cardiologist. "Hum hum yeah, but," he defends himself, "I didn't know when the moment was right and I couldn't tell for sure it was going to be welcome." It's indeed much easier to have a good view from the outside, I confirm. But, it's been a jolly evening. Not bad, for quick drinks after work on a Monday.

Soul searching

Back home from work, I go through the Internet Addict Routine. No personal email since I've left the office, more than half an hour ago. Nobody loves me. Bastards. Then onto the dating site of the month. I've got a message! Do I look at it straight away or browse profiles first to make the hope of a nice hit last a little while?

I'll check some profiles then. I only returned a week ago to that particular site, so it's not so bad that I see all the same heads yet, but it's going to be a problem – stock rotation tends to be slow on dating sites. I order results by 'last login' rather than the rather useless and stale match ordering. This site has a particularly retarded matching algorithm, only taking into account basics like location, age, height, (fair enough), and then mostly irrelevant rubbish like eye or hair colour – everyone would do the supermodel who's got the wrong eye colour – and then comes up with a match percentage with two decimal digits. The site is clunky all round but it gets the job done, and they've got the crowd, they've sort of cornered the mid-thirties professional London market.

First 20 of 500 results shown. OK, maybe we're overdoing it with choice here. Online dating is funny. You've got an immense catalogue and there's only girls around. It's easy to forget the competition and scan around as if you were the last man left on Earth, and that there's that entire world waiting for you.

Click, cute face. "Likes hedgehogs." Yeah, bit better than the usual headline. Other pics, ouch. Cute face on headline picture, was a good day, photo 2 is not so good, and photo 3 has got a (very) full body shot. Bad luck that I'm a fattist. Still read the blurb. Quite interesting actually, she's done archaeological studies in South America (ok, brag, brag), has a sense of humour of sorts, rare enough, not too pretentious, not too boring, can write. There's the theory that not so attractive people need to get out and do something to get somewhere in the world, while the attractive ones just need to get out of the house, look pretty, and pick whoever is not too horrible and is in front of the rapidly forming queue, never having to become someone. Pity. Next.

Uncertain face, but could be something. Click. Cute Friends Picture Syndrome. Girls, when will you learn that it's not helping to show yourself in a group of friends where you're the ugliest? I mean, we know we might not pull Miss Universe, but we don't need to be reminded, when we're looking at your profile, that we're being offered not only someone who's not a model, but who's not even competitive with her best friends, who if we get involved with you are going to be around reminding us that we pulled the wrong one. And as they're your friends, if we like you, we'll probably like them as well; insult, injury, addition. OK they may be coupled, whatever, but still, please, don't. Tempted to send a lecture message but no, never lecture on a dating site, it's counterproductive and in that case impossible to do tactfully. I scan the blurb but have lost enthusiasm by then.

Back button. Oh, she's not bad here at the bottom of the page. No disaster on full profile. The holiday photo is boring. The blurb in the same register, she has been in London for 2 years now, and loves it, and likes to discover new 'eateries' – you bet she always goes to the same two places – and to enjoy all the city has to offer. Mediocrity can be so irritating. Continues on and on in the same vein. Stock girl from Girls'R'Us, top sales in spring, she'll probably be sorted in no time. Sort of cute though. Ah, side pane, body preference: Stocky, Well built, Medium. OK, fair enough. That's actually one of the most useful features of this otherwise rather second-rate dating site, body type. Girls tend to be quite fixated on doing the muscle heads or the skinny; bears and twinkles as they say on the gay scene. This fattist being clearly on the latter side, no chance. Oh well, at least it's nice to be told.

Maybe I should read that one message, now that I've enjoyed some nothingness. You can't last forever on expectations. Or yes, maybe we can. Maybe we should. Philosophy for another day. So, who's that? Did I write to this woman? I click through the profile again. Ah, that one. Yes, it recalls something vague, it must have been the end of the last shopping session, OK looks, OK blurb, but nothing to write home about. Disappointment, as planned. Yet, what does she write? "Yes, you can't hold your breath forever." What did I write? Some tired wit about her scuba diving holiday picture. Fair enough reply, but then hard to hang onto that one. Often I feel I make all the effort in my opening one-liners, carefully crafted to be mildly funny, on a good day, making a reference to the profile to prove I'm not a robot or mass mailer, and invite an easy response. Now girls don't play. And don't get me started on those who complain that men only write one-liners. The point of an opening message is to show you've read a profile and are interested in starting a conversation. There's a fair chance the girl will then glance at our headline picture and click delete instantly, or spend the best part of twenty seconds to find out something she doesn't like about you, based on one of all those criteria girls have and don't tell you about on their profile. So, they

could as well be content with a custom one-liner to get the ball rolling. And virtually all the women who have ever made the first step, which is about three in as many years, all wrote one-liners. Even goldiggers write one-liners. But I was saying I wasn't getting started on one-liners, let's not start. Back to our scuba diving friend. On the one hand I'm totally unsporty, and not quite normal, and she seems sporty, and quite normal. Half the guys on this side are normal and will happily pretend to be sporty, and the other half are sporty and will pretend to be normal, so it's far fetched and if I do fetch I'll get bored quickly. But still I haven't had a date in a couple of months and it could make good training and who knows, she might just appear normal and I could always be positively surprised by hidden riches. And she's sort of cute. But I'm out of ideas on what to answer. Ponder, ponder. I'll write later. I could put her in my shopping basket – she can see that on the site's reverse shopping basket feature, which shows the opposition who you've put in your queue – but that rarely produces a response, so better off writing at once, and thus I don't need to manage a queue. Fire and forget. In the meantime let's keep her in a tab in the browser and open another one for more shopping until I get some inspiration (or breath).

I'm now, merely, on page two of my matches. Non-descript galore, and I get shopping fatigue. Scroll down, scroll up again. Here's a slightly fuzzy profile picture, and the rest are all from the same set – making it harder to decode – in some bucolic garden setting. Tall, reasonable shape, fuzzy face. Hm. Still looks promising enough. The text is a digression, she's a duchess who's lost her husband in a duel fight, against a former suitor who's now in jail for murder, and who was unwarrantably besotted, for he is a commoner of no great character but foolishness, and an uncanny but merely technical ability to shoot straight. Refreshing. I write asking if she'd take me as her butler.

Now I still need an idea for the scuba diving, let's not quit now I've invested so much in keeping a tab open. I can't find an idea. I stare at the profile once again. Hope she's not online and checking her profile viewers, otherwise I'll look desperate. Which I'm not. Really. No, really. Well, not that kind of desperate. I just need a night out. So I ask something bland about where she's spent her last holiday. Dull. At times it seems that writing to bland people makes me bland, as if I was adapting to their level. Or perhaps it's interesting people who take me out of my ordinary blandness, in a flash of reflected glory?

OK I've written to two tonight, that should be enough. I say that if you write to one a day on average, that's just 300 odd a year. Of these, once you've got the hang of online dating and get past the early period of no replies whatsoever, you should reach a response rate of say 1 in 4. Of these, half will continue some conversation until you can invite them for a drink, at which

point half of them will disappear, either straightforwardly, or behind some excuse of some kind, like they're leaving for a two month business trip on Wednesday. Of the half who agree to meet, half drop out on some technicalities as well, so that makes you actually meet one in sixteen of the opening one-liners, which makes approximately one or two a month if we start from the 300 above. Good rhythm, it's borderline not-even-freaky.

But I'm addicted, so I keep on browsing, collecting tabs of the superficially doable. More browsing and reviewing tabs. Closing half of them. Do I miss the perfect girlfriend or even a good shag by clicking on the little cross? It's all pretty lame. Half an hour later I've got a dozen tabs open, this has to stop. I remember that I need to book a flight to Berlin – we're going for a weekend out with Henry, should be fun. The process is a bit similar, google for companies flying to Berlin, comparison sites, end up with the shortlist. Predictably EasyJet ends up the obvious choice, price OK, a bit more than Ryanair but less hostile staff. Might as well have skipped the research. Maybe I should skip the research and date from the first page of results only too. But that makes me wonder what the sex life of easyStelios is like. Google. Wikipedia. Browse around. It's not easy. So much for the Internet killing privacy, if you can't find gory details on any middling celebrity. He keeps his private life private, says someone tangential. Officially single it seems. I can't find more. On the face of it he shouldn't do too bad. Rich. Tick. OK, women are not interested in money but enough of them are totally interested in guys who earn a living, power, shoes, all that stuff. Tall, dark, and handsome. Well dark is a start. And he's rich, and possibly not so short. Funny? Sort of, could be, if one is to infer from his media character, if not spoilt by an undercurrent of uptightness, unless he has a ghost writer, but then he could afford a ghost writer in his private life too. Gay? Probably not, the reading on the gaydar is quite low. So, on paper he should pull like a magnet and be a much eligible bachelor. Where's the gossip?

Back to serious stuff, I still have a dozen tabs to go through.

Fortifications

Fuzzy Duellist has agreed to meet at the bar in the Barbican. We kept the fiction going while emailing so I actually know nothing about her apart from her faint pictures and that she can write and has a bit of imagination. It's a start, and you really don't need to know much of the routine details you usually get either. Job, mortgage, and other assorted facts are not interesting, apart from how you interact with them. All the useful information is between the facts really.

I am running late, bit of date stress still – so annoying. I have done this for so long that it shouldn't bother me at all but when there's potential sex on offer, it seems I can't help being a bit nervous. She arrives later than me, not that I mind waiting that much, but it does make the senseless nervousness pointlessly longer, and hard to do anything else. The place is quiet, there's a performance on, but it's already started so few people are here until the interval. Here's a couple made of a middle aged guy, who must be well advanced in his forties, tweed jacket and professorial looks, still has hair and seems to be a well rounded man, but he's with an excessively cute late twenties girl, who still looks like a grad student. Between arty and geeky. He should leave her to those of our generation, or even her generation. Another girl walks past who could possibly be Fuzzy Duellist, but she moves briskly, probably not. I look at the square barrelled concrete ceiling, it's difficult to get the upper bits of rooms right in interior architecture, another of the Barbican's details that is masterful. It has been revamped recently but was sympathetic and they kept the fabric of the building, which manages to make Brutalism quite comfy if you allow for an acclimatisation period. “Hi!” says someone who must be my Fuzzy Duellist.

Brain overload as I must make a few empty introductory sentences and direct us to one of the bars, while resolving the fuzzy pictures and making the all the mandatory initial assessments. Well. Precision is not flattering. She's all right, bit of a bloke face though, but she definitely looked better fuzzy. Maybe I should have left my specs at home. I manage to string together some half decent sentences, but the atmosphere remains chilly. The habitual barman, who seems to recognise the guy who's rotated a few dates in this very place in the past few months, looks amused.

The first half hour is business-like, where do you come from, weather, traffic, work, all the unimportant subjects. She's an oncology nurse, who converted to the vocation late, after a spell as a secretary. I remark that it must be quite rewarding to do such a valuable job, if a bit stressful. She seems more tired than anything else about it, and speaks with great enthusiasm of her ambitions to become a potter. I nod politely, thinking it's going to be tough, nursing sounds less erratic, and indeed more valuable. Sadly a worthy job does not make an interesting or agreeable job, albeit clearly one notch up from having a crap one doing something reprehensible.

The crowd from the performance gets out, the wine gets in, and we're getting more relaxed. There's a fair number of more alluring women in the youth section of that classical crowd. It's one of the problems of dating in public places, as girls you'd rather be with walk past the back of the one you're with. But she's not that bad, and the smalltalk becomes more pleasant.

Cunningly, the Barbican bar closes before the performance ends, surely someone must have thought it was their duty to prevent concertgoers from turning the evening into a scene of inordinate debauchery by having a third glass of wine in the evening. Quite believable given it's run by some offshoot of the Corporation of London, that most baroque of English institutions, part old boys network, part medieval historical re-enactment society, fast breeding ground for well meaning paternalism. Glad they did manage that excursion into bold Brutalism, however improbably. Still being kicked out is good, time for another bar. She doesn't seem in a particular hurry to go home, despite being close to the usual bed time on a school night. But she doesn't work tomorrow, an advantage of shift work.

We move on a few streets, Smithfield way, to an American comics themed bar. It's almost empty but so we have a sofa to settle in all to ourselves. I don't last much more than three glasses of wine so action might be required soon. She tells me about her travels, she's been to Vietnam and Thailand on her own a few years ago; quite unusual for a girl, she notes herself, but she didn't get any serious trouble really. "Not even a single mugging?", I ask. Nope, the locals were sweet and colourful, and she loved escaping the backpackers track, no point in being the stereotypical Australian only ever talking to other Aussies or the odd Brit, and hardly ever escaping from the guidebook trails and places and their daily pizza and coke. She's increasingly likeable. She disappears for a long break to the loo. Weekday London can be a bit empty. Some drunk French tourists at the bar, probably barely 20, two standard issue blokes, one ordinary girl who must work as a supermarket cashier, and one fairly ugly with an over-dimensioned bottom, nor is she saved by her few years. What are these blokes doing with these girls? Family outing? Despair? The fat girl seems to flirt. Mine comes back from her long

break. She redid her make-up, rather than remove it, as some do at this stage or even earlier, which feels promising.

We chat a bit more, she tells me about colourful markets and Thai jewellery, so it's been a shopping trip really, I tease. I move a bit closer, move hands over shoulder, send a helicopter squadron on the left side. She doesn't bulge, does as if she's not noticed my move, but it's perfectly obvious she has. Unclip the safety release. Aim for lips. Fire. She lets the kiss run, with understated resistance. Nice. Pull back, recall the helicopters. "What?" she said, "It's a bit direct, we're only on our first date!" Yes, right, you're supposed to move away when you see it coming if you're not interested darling. She argues feebly but pleasantly. I quite like it. Allegedly, her other dates don't do that, a peck perhaps, but not that far. Possibly. I explain I'm inept anyway. She tries to demolish that theory. I keep my distance now, I don't want to be the pushy retard either, even if I've seen that work countless times in the wild.

The comics bar was getting too empty to stay, and it's nearly 2am on a weekday. It's only because she's a nurse not on duty tomorrow that she stayed; London is dead, even in that nightlife hot spot. We're reduced to going to the only late place still open, a dumping ground of the late weekday night, The Berber. Middle Eastern decor made with supplies from B&Q's value line. Bit cheesy but not completely. It has a door policy, enforced by a tall menacing guy who seems very much up himself, and pricey drinks made for late suits, mostly, and a strange type of night reveller who must have escaped from the West End, that you don't usually see round these parts. Plenty of uncomfortable seating space, given the cheapest foam on a cursory timber frame. But still, not a bad place to keep on going. She tells me she didn't like me earlier in the evening but I've turned to be not that despicable after all. We play a bit more. "Again?" she says, loosening the resistance. Yet she probably won't come home. Never mind, will barely frustrate me at this stage, and I'm getting beyond my drink allowance anyway.

I inexplicably walk her back to a distant bus stop, as hints about the proximity of my dwelling are summarily dismissed. It's chilly. She waxes lyrical about the merits of Exmouth Market. I long for her bus. When it comes: thanks and goodbye. She gets in and I turn away, not looking back.

As I arrive home I get a text message saying "thanks for kissing me!" I answer it was my pleasure, genuinely. The evening was uplifting, but left me in a confused state. I'm starting to think I should leave it there. No matter, tomorrow is another day, and the alcohol needs to flush before deciding anything.

Yellow River

Text message. Henry is meeting a couple of friends at a bar in Islington, I'm invited to join. Sounds good, nothing much to do tonight, in typical fashion. Google the place, easy walk.

I've got slightly lost, two streets off, but finally arrive. Victorian corner pub, fairly tiny; trendies, but not too annoyingly so, fill the place. Passable arty decor, tartan patterns, record covers, suitably dimmed lighting out of faux oil lamps. Henry was on an errand this afternoon taking some random photography with his DSLR camera, and he asks me to take some pictures of him, as he thinks his online profile pictures need to go a bit beyond the self portrait with a camera phone in your bathroom genre. This pub is a suitable setting, and that camera should cope with low light, I attempt a couple of takes, some of which come out fairly decent. Maybe he should take a few of me as well while we're at it. Another point of having third party pictures is that it shows you have one friend, which is always good salesmanship, women like social boys who have more than zero friends, for some reason, I remark. Try reversing the angles with Henry, and take another couple of pictures of him with an oil lamp in the frame for effect and a hint of good taste.

He's waiting for a friend of his from Newcastle, Katrin. "You'll like her boobs" he says matter of factly. He explains he met her off some dating site and that she's a polyamorous girl, which he's now quite inclined to redefine himself as. I object to the unwanted complications that might result from one-to-many configurations when it's already complicated enough to get one-to-one relationships to function. We can't really finish the argument as Katrin arrives. Cleavage indeed! Platinum blonde that fits, a good five foot five, understated trendy, and a chequered shirt that can be forgiven when it's so carefully unbuttoned. She's coming with a tall thin Elisa, who Henry also seems to be familiar with, it turns out. I'm starting to think I'll soon be in need of a graph with colour-coded lines for the various combinations of sex/friend relationships, their strength and expiry dates, but I can't get any of these mysteries resolved at this point as we get into civilised friends of friends conversation mode. After a diversion through the horrors of Northern English climes, the subject matter moves on to home education. No, it will

make kids unequipped for real life, but yes, the quality is incomparable and they can get real life in high school if you do home schooling only from a younger age. I listen with the disbelief of a nun stumbling on a porn magazine. Kids, whatever.

Elisa has also invited a male friend to crash in, who knows Katrin, and introduces himself as Woozle. I ponder briefly whether someone choosing for himself such a moniker should be summarily dismissed, or given a chance – it could be due to parental abuse after all. Soon after, the new people and empty glasses trigger a mass movement and consequent reshuffling of sitting positions. I now find myself talking to Woozle and Katrin while Henry is entering a seemingly deep conversation with Elisa on two stools behind the others. Relocated with the stranger, I manage with the occasional nod, as Woozle is dominating the conversation with tales of achievements that seem only to contribute to making him subtly dislikeable, but which leaves time for the regular glance down Katrin's blouse.

After another drink, even that Woozle guy has become almost likeable. Elisa stands up from the conference call with Henry, seemingly going into the direction of the toilet. I'm on the way, and try to make her earn her way through. She sees Henry's camera that I still have with me and asks "Do you like to take pictures of women pissing?" Bemused, trying to get the joke, I answer "yes, sure." She goes back to Henry, and the Maginot line remains unvanquished.

Woozle and Katrin have moved onto yoga. Maybe I should take that up, I think silently, sounds like a suitable sport for the unsporty, and doomed to have a favourable gender ratio for the single gent on the hunt. I nod indecisively at the whole body harmony thing, and start thinking that I need magic glasses which turn people into wearing tight fitting yoga outfits – but, no, actually, that couldn't possibly beat Katrin's blouse, although at the moment she has unfortunately turned to a less favourable angle.

This time Elisa has packed up, and is leaving with Henry. When she gets next to me, "Come now, we'll do these photos before I leave." I get up, confused; and as Henry smiles, amused, and motions me to stand up, I recall her earlier question. In no time we're out of the pub. It's late and the streets are quiet, it rained earlier. The pavement shines and reflects the dim orange street lights. We move on a few yards round the corner, to the mildly quieter but hardly less exposed side street. She asks "Ready?", and then "Do you prefer with or without panties?" She doesn't wait for the answer that doesn't come, while I awkwardly manage to switch on the camera and aim vaguely, as she takes her skirt up, thong sideways, squats and starts pissing. I'm about 3 feet in front of her, she aims towards somewhere in between us on the pavement but

somehow misses enough for the remarkably powerful yellow jet to wash off my shoes. A few slow motion seconds later, she gets back up, readjusts the underwear, takes down her skirt, and is ready to go. Henry, more amused than surprised, smiles, and then they say goodbye before I have much time to absorb what has just happened. My feet are feeling a bit wet as some of the misfire soaks in.

I wander back into the pub, and sit back at the table with my new drinking comrades. Woozle being quiet for once, I start telling what has just happened. Woozle disbelieves; but, I do, after all, have photographic evidence and wet shoes. Between the misfocused, shaky ones and the poor framing, there still miraculously remains a passably credible shot of the shooting. Katrin, who knows of Eliza, explains that she's on the fetish scene and, from what Henry had told her, it doesn't sound too much out of character that she'd be into the peeing subscene, and possibly something of an exhibitionist as well. After all, we agree, what has she done? She's only peed a few yards away from the location that is customarily allocated to the task, the indoor toilet. For some reason, humans tend to attend to such activities in private, or in partial privacy, e.g. men's stalls. Though sometimes stage fright kicks in, I note. Katrin points out that you get some girls who do suffer from a similar predicament in thinly partitioned establishments, and have a harder time getting the job done where there's chat or noise around from the next stall. Still, somehow there's a strong privacy barrier somewhere; and only Woozle, who is by now quite unsure of his words, declares he could consider taking up the hobby.

At the bank

It's going to be a busy day: a date stack is planned for today. First, lunch with an investment banker from near work, and tonight at seven a regular evening date at the Barb. The former is my first date with someone from that new website, run by that daytime television MILF with pleasantly rotund boobs. The premise of the site is to make the online dating experience more relaxed and friendly by having your profile written by a friend, who has their own account and introduces you. People are not allowed to write their own profile directly, unless they create themselves a fake friend. The idea is well meaning, but suffers from a fatal flaw: men don't have friends. Well, not quite, though sociologists will tell you that they on average do have smaller and shallower friendship circles than women do, but men don't really discuss relationships and dating to anything like the same extent. The idea of writing your mate's profile is just plain awkward, and improbable; while it's a totally natural thing for telly MILF and her girlfriends, and women in general. Result, the site has few men, which is a pleasant reversal of the usual imbalance, though the more sophisticated and relationship oriented sites are sometimes getting close to parity. So I had the girl experience of getting flooded with interest – relatively speaking at least, a dozen messages in the first couple of weeks was a change over the usual zilch, even if it seems to have died down by now. Banker wasn't truly the best of the bunch, but she seemed keen, and lunchtime break is a small investment. Beggars can't be choosers.

I'm waiting in front of her bank's curved limestone facade. She texts she'll be five minutes late, later than me for once, though going downstairs from your office shouldn't be that hard. Mediterranean temperament surely, she's Italian. A few suits are going out. Tall girl, doubts, no; she walks purposefully past. I watch the traffic. Hello. She's finally arrived. Dark half length hair, Mediterranean complexion indeed, a bit stocky, not quite in a bad way, but not really my type. But it does come with fairly likeable front matter. Probably an error. She, purposefully – it must be the corporate ethos – takes me to the lunch place she has in mind. Queue. Full. Plan B. She's definitely well organised and full of initiative, I'd employ her if I had, I don't know, a convention centre to run. Fairly innocuous, perhaps too innocuous, smalltalk on the way. She's into sailing. Beats golf, I guess, but too stocky a sport for

me. We arrive at a posh City sandwich place, not even a Pret, a niche chain instead, quite original of her, or maybe it's just because it's bang opposite her window.

She mechanically executes her sandwich, with but a few quick exchanges, and as I'm half in mine, gets up abruptly and declares, with ultimate purpose, again: "Don't move!" I look at her somewhat confused by the abrupt break, and, as she is getting up and buttoning up her jacket she explains with more precision: "Stay here, I'm going back, it was nice to meet you." And is gone. Obviously she didn't get far in investment banking by letting losers chime in. So, that was the fastest date ever. Must count under 15 minutes on the clock. Well, OK, it was far fetched, and we were a very plausible mismatch but somehow I'd have expected it to be up to finish the sandwich standards.

As I eat up and take an elongated reflexive walk back to work, I accept the unassailable quality of the mismatch, and think that, actually, my profile on the telly MILF site having been written by my friend Arizona Tina, which may explain it. She had warned me it wouldn't work when I showed her the profile. Banker had earlier said she liked Tina's writeup very much, and I can see how these two would get along famously. They have a similar brand of character, outspokenness, unintellectual cleverness, and a similar build to boot. The differences seem more in tone and context, and Tina is too interesting to endure the boredom and grind that the investment banking life must be. There. I'm not bitter. At all. Good luck, sailor. Thankfully, I shall have digested that one by the time of my next tea break. Let's hope tonight's is a bit better.

I leave work straight as usual, direct to date number two, let's hope she doesn't rush out the door as well.

Back in the Barbican, pre-concert crowd in the lobby, still manage to find my date. Looks a tad older than the photo, but passable. Probably a bit older than me despite advertising 36. She may have done age discounting beyond the regulatory two years. Tallish, shapely, flatish, the full package is not earth shattering but overall pleasant. I'm no landslide when it comes to first impressions either.

The conversation flows agreeably enough. We pass the fifteen minutes mark with flying colours. She's an actress. With a day job. And middle aged. She seems to verge on the defensive but I don't push on the acting, though venture whether she's always acting, in real life as well, which she denies, unconvincingly. As I finish my second glass of wine I start to like her a little bit. She seems in a fairly unemotional mood. While not falling into the interview genre in a bad way, she remains too business-like. That may be the

actor thing. I ponder on how it might actually be possible or not to deal with theatrical people in real life, one to talk through with the girls another day.

She does stay for a third glass, and, less wisely, I do as well. As the Barbican show crowd leaves, I get misguided and with excess enthusiasm offer meeting again, which she dismisses, if more softly and agreeably than the one this lunchtime, just placing a brief “You're an interesting guy, but no.” in the flow of an otherwise innocuous departure talk.

As I walk back home, after leaving her at the tube station on the way, without further incidents, I feel subtly dejected, I realise how silly I am to inflict this on myself. No need to get rejected by people you don't care about much and then feel sorry for it. Live and learn, thankfully it should be one easy to sleep on and forget. And the wine was good, for house wine.

Colonoscopy

We're in a Berlin S-bahn train. It's Saturday night. We've been in town since Friday, trying, with so far some success, to avoid the drunken anglophone tourist circuit. As the red and dirty yellow carriage rattles along, a group of neighbouring youthful English-speaking hipsters are discussing how surprising it is that some advertising executives have past lives as revolutionaries, in the sixties or seventies. A girl is telling of the experience of one of these turncoat revolutionaries she's read the biography of, to her disbelieving mates, standing as they are at the peak of twenty-something righteousness. I briefly interject that when people get older the real world hits them, but we reach our stop before I stand any chance of even failing to convince them that they will be that devil in a short decade or two.

We get out at the station, East Berlin's former main station, still vast, but which has been renovated to incorporate a bland shopping centre, probably losing a bit of character in the process. We walk out, quickly finding ourselves among some of Eastern Germany's signature tower blocks, and a few smaller prefab blocks at their feet, one now a brightly painted tourist hostel. Few shops, or people, it is a residential area with a soul of industry. A short stroll on a vast avenue and we walk past an office block, another GDR relic, still proud and barely touched by time. Henry tells me more about the girl who recommended this club. He had a couple of dates with her. She described it as the best club in the world. Ever the geek, I did the online research and it has indeed got quite a reputation, and I'm glad I had checked the map beforehand or we'd have had trouble finding it. Henry's date was in an indie band, and he went to one of their gigs. He says they were a bit of a hopeless hodge-podge of people, an ancient drummer, with the look of someone who's close to accepting failure, but hangs on to the last straw of hope, kids on synth and a guitar, and the girl, too short and too common, and perhaps already too old, early thirties after all, as lead singer and guitarist. They seemed to him an unlikely bunch without much of a chance of getting anywhere at all. Music was tidily pleasant without being anything special, hard to take off from the amateur circuit from there, despite their best efforts at trying to go professional. To some extent the band reflected its leader, the despondency of her hope embodied in flesh. "Talent may be one of these things where moderation is not a good idea", he concludes.

“You’ll regret that when she’s famous,” I say, “and let’s hope she’s got a modicum of taste when it comes to clubbing or we’ll be despondent too.” He explains he didn’t say anything anyway, hard to demolish someone’s hopes tactfully, especially when one’s dating, and he could have been wrong to boot. Did she suit him, professional prospects notwithstanding, I ask. “Not much, though perhaps there was a little something that may have had some potential”, he replies, “but I haven’t been in touch for three months so I guess it does count as a lapsed one.” We walk past freshly repainted industrial or storage buildings, Berlin’s dereliction seems to be disappearing fast. But we’re still markedly off the beaten track, I comment. “Not even a mile off”, says Henry, “so that doesn’t count I reckon.”

We’ve found the building, despite the total lack of signage, sitting slightly awkwardly between a deserted DIY store’s car park and some spare land beyond the industrial estate. There’s already a sizeable queue, despite us coming early in Berlin time, or so said the Internet, barely after midnight. A compact stocky grey building, with Neostalinist windows adding to the understated industrial majesty, echoing the palaces of the people in nearby Stalinallée. Uncle Joe had more taste than Uday Hussein. Faint house music and colour reflections emanate from the upstairs room’s windows. The queue is quiet, as if waiting for the schoolmaster to inspect, mainly boys, older than the average underground club back in London. About a third of people seem to be turned away, despite not being trashed. We wonder if we’ll get in and try to infer the rules. A group of British boys, in immaculate condition by British Saturday night standards, look loutish here and get unsurprisingly dispatched. They seem surprised. Four girls, not even properly whored up, modest cleavage but the look of the weary tourist that has done a museum too many: away too. We’re in sight of the schoolmaster. Shorter than his Wikipedia reputation, heavyset, greasy hair, probably authentic rather than the dirty hair lotion a fashionable shower obsessive might use, face tattoos, tanned in a non ethnic way, yet hard to imagine he actually goes to UV salons. He looks like he’s forever been in his fifties, and that he would in reality have made a poor dictator, despite yielding the ultimate power of life and death on people’s evenings.

We’re nodded in and silently walk past and get to the security search. Dutifully respecting the own-gender rule that is perhaps slightly meaningless in a club where virtually all the staff and many of the patrons are gay, it is borderline exciting. Twelve euros parted to the stern headmistress character, who looks as if she has recently left a soviet era motivational poster, stamping our hands mechanically with machine precision. We’re through. A single wallpapered wall faces the concrete of the vast cloakroom. Chandeliers made as a remix of the GDR-era lamppost you see everywhere in East Berlin, ignored by everyone, feel like a refined touch to me. Looking at the filtered

crowd, so sober, a couple of hipsters in front, middle aged bald gay guys behind us, younger, probably tourists behind.

As we move on and enter the next room, three storeys high, concrete all over, sizeable bar included, Henry remarks that “it's a bit empty.” I point to the boxy metal staircase that leads up, we're only in some sort of entrance hall, even if that is bigger than most clubs already. Light flashes from upstairs, almost quietly, and people unhurriedly walk up. This ground floor hall is indeed almost deserted but has some depth. Dark rooms, it seems, or at least corners, behind the almost deserted bar. We go up.

We emerge in an even larger space, though in the grand scheme of things it's actually quite human sized, not an airport hall or a stadium. Grand industrial cosy, perhaps. The Stalinist windows are blanked but their frames employed to best effect. A triple height bar on the right, more floors and another staircase on the right. A pit by the staircase which opens on the main dance floor. Four stacks of unmistakably recognisable Funktion One speakers stand guard around the dance floor. No disco ball in sight. There's more people than downstairs and it still looks like a sensible continental bar crowd, if with the more mainstream clients removed. We get a drink from the Triple Height Bar. Pillars behind the bar have little signs showing a GHB vial being used to spike a drink in a crossed red circle. Classy place. Henry notes that the bar prices are barely above regular bar level, so we're in value for money territory as well. He is getting all excited about the fit assertive waitress with short platinum blonde hair. “Lesbo”, I laconically remind him.

It's now about 1am, and there's about three people on the dance floor. We continue our exploratory tour. Low ceiling to the toilets with a bar in front of them. Not quite inside – “Someone should do a club with a bar inside the toilets”, I tell Henry. Blue light and pink light toilets. Gender coding, improbably. A couple of bears are sitting in the corner, the bar staff looks like a perfectly assorted couple of blokes, mid-forties, tried everything, and the best for it. We move to the second staircase to some upstairs, smaller area that will get cramped later on, surely. Nice view from the top, near the light man's desk. Giant smoke machine with three big spare jerrycans of smoke liquid.

Past the corridor, we're reaching back into the room we were seeing the windows of from the queue. Piano nobile. The music is not very distinguishable from downstairs, still fairly slow tempo on the introductory DJ slots. A giant bar at the back keeps half the place busy. We walk around. A massive photograph of an hermaphrodite's genitals dominates the back wall. The rear corridor is fitted with niches, in remnants of room sized industrial electrical cabinets, which have been upholstered – for quick action,

or a slow hug? – but stand forlorn at this time of night. We sit near the bar, a couple of middle aged women near us, looking slightly out of place, first and last time here, from Stuttgart, I speculate. They will probably go to bed before the night starts in earnest.

As the music subtly accelerates, we recall my encounter with Elisa the other night. He explains her background. He met her online, she came to his, fell asleep, said let's meet again and then disappeared. He then tried the regulatory two, or three – he doesn't quite recall – contact attempts at some weeks interval and she talked again. She squeezed him mid afternoon for some exhibition before proceeding to see her then boyfriend. He got the message, after a while, and it's one of those things which turned into friendship quite neatly, with a fairly low level of background ambiguity radiation. She's quite into the fetish scene, and it was one of those days, but apart from that she normally urinates in toilets. She's also polyamory which slightly tickled Henry, as it's sort of an aggravated failure to fail to sleep with someone who sleeps with everybody, but polyamory is not anyamory, or mere promiscuity. Henry adds that he finds the “My husband and my boyfriend” subscene quite irritating – these guys can be quite anal, so to speak, about their bigamy. “I suspect that many of them may operate a ‘strictly no DP’ policy, which is a bit of a waste”, I remark. The music has become louder and, as Henry's next remark fizzles between a beat and some thirsty hipsters in trademark specs, we move on.

We're back downstairs after a round of the still-quiet upstairs backroom. Some people have started dancing, a constant but balanced flow pops in from the staircase. The dance floor is starting to take shape, though still quite thin. We pass through a grilled-up bridge across the large opening above the stairs. Going up to a club is slightly disorientating. Debauchery is supposed to be underground. You could argue it's not even debauchery and just a glorified bar, I tell Henry. “I've never been in a bar that glorified”, he quips.

The BPM rate has gone higher, for the better. I move on to the dancefloor while Henry stays at the bar watching an increasingly colourful world go past. The music is measuredly thumping, not even unpleasantly loud. The DJ booth is fitted with red velvet curtains. It's still early and the floor is far from capacity, you can still see through and have a comfortable space to move around. I am near the back wall, at the remote end of the dancefloor, with a view across the cathedral like space. On the left I notice a couple of very obviously gay guys in leather regalia. Behind them and behind the speakers, some entrance to what must be a dark room, which is situated below the top floor dance area we were in earlier. A couple of dancing podiums are used as a bench, so far. The leather couple have been dancing for a while near me, and they stop, purposefully. Two bears, probably early forties. One has a

receding hairline. They both have already taken their shirt off and their mildly hairy naked chests are fitted with regulation leather strapwork. The shorter one, moderately stocky, looking relaxed and on a routine, takes down his leather pants, folds them with care and puts them down on the floor near the wall. He's wearing a leather thong underneath. He keeps his shoes. "He must think it's too hot in here", I think, unrealistically. They keep on dancing for a few more minutes round each other, like in a lazy choreography. They seem to know each other really well; not a mating ritual, it seems.

Then Short Stocky Man takes off his leather thong, and positions himself on the floor, doggy style, head towards the open dance floor, bottom towards the back wall. His mate kneels behind him and caresses his naked arse for a short but sustained time. He then in turn, in a businesslike manner, takes a rubber glove from the left pocket of the leather trousers he's still wearing, and puts it on his right hand. "They're simulating play", I tell myself, while his covered hand moves back and forth behind Stocky Man's behind. I do a dance manoeuvre to discreetly improve the viewing angle, and then, I have to admit that the gentleman is fisting, gently, knowingly, lovingly even, his mate, on the dance floor, in the middle of one, or two, hundred people. Who, as I look around the dance floor, are dancing as if nothing was happening. Only in Berlin. I acknowledge Henry who is still sitting on a stool at the bar, in a great diagonal position to watch the spectacle. He looks incredulous while trying to look as he's watching the happenings in front of a bus stop in the Home Counties. A few people, probably fellow tourists like us, at the far end of the dance floor near the entry staircase also appear to be in a state of disbelief, but otherwise most of the room seem contentedly unfazed. A small space has been freed around the performer. Our gentlemen are proceeding with controlled vigour; then, change position. The recipient is now standing, legs apart, faintly squatting, his back to the floor and crowd, while his companion is now sat on the floor, pumping up and down with his gloved hand moving up and down his lover's backdoor. The music stomps on, the DJ as unperturbed as the crowd. They get back later into doggy-style position, and quietly finish it off. Some lubricant has fallen on the dance floor. While Short Stocky Man puts his leather thong and trousers back on, the other guy takes out, as per magic, a roll of kitchen towels and mops up the lube that has fallen on the dance floor. Our fisting enthusiasts have a sense of civic duty which is clearly to be commended. Maybe they are Swiss?

I rejoin Henry at the bar, suitably bemused, and order a drink. Bar life continues as usual. The probably lesbian barmaid is short and pensive, semi long dark hair, moody square face, but suitably efficient. Henry says that, after all, it was just something some people otherwise do in private, or in the dark rooms on the other side of the hall, and it's funny that it becomes an out of the ordinary act just because it's done in public. "Yes," I reply, analytically

sipping my newly delivered Bacardi Coke, “obviously, all sexual activity triggers some inbuilt privacy mechanism, as people rarely do even plain sex in the open. There might be special settings like swinger clubs or the hobby orgy, but all of this is some form of organised transgression, where people are trying to escape the normal.” He replies that he didn't know I was moonlighting as a sociology lecturer. “Is that your own transgression?” he quips. I smile back, losing the thread of my well constructed argument, but I still find the courage to note that kissing is OK here. He replies that he once met a girl, well a relative of one of his dates, who was, in her late twenties, so not a kid, active on the fetish scene, occasionally a professional dominatrix, and on the board of some US organisation like the National Association for the Advancement of Perverted People, or some such fetish rights pressure group and was all uh-ah-ing about seeing too many people, for her taste, smooching in public in London bars, or in Europe more generally. “Yuck, they should get a room”, she had argued. And it was only on a regular drunken night level of action, Henry adds. As the dancefloor has become more densely packed, and we're getting squashed out of doing social science research at the bar, we decide to move on back upstairs.

The more compact dance floor up there is more densely packed, the crowd straighter. The music fits a more sardinesque kind of dancing. The configuration is more like that of typical hipsters' clubs who play the mainstream kind of mid-tempo, repetitively smoothish electronica. Not unpleasant but not the best for dancing, but my thoughts do not prevent Henry from remarking “I like it here.” I try to explain that it's better downstairs but he listens distractedly, and on top of the noise, it is clear he doesn't get a word of what I'm saying. I realise shortly that he's looking at some youthful female thing with gravity defying tits. Almost six feet, the right amount of curves, a contentedly pretty face, a mixed air of self confidence and youthful nonchalance, almost dangerous, and mid length hair, she's with some boy, matching her standard precisely. As we stand observing for a few minutes it seems she gets chatted up, no less than three times in less than ten minutes, despite being fairly obviously with that guy. I guess the suitors might think he's just her bodyguard, or a gay mate. It's not chatting up central either, or, well, the rhythm with the other attendants seems much more muted. It is a compact illustration of the winner-take-all nature of the chase and its context dependence. With lesser packaging, say baggy clothes and a Women's Institute haircut, and a correspondingly muted attitude, there could be no submitted application for weeks.

We move on along the back corridor towards the bar. The cubicles have now been put into use, though a quick peek hardly reveals anything untoward: an intoxicated gent sleeping, a couple who should be kissing, or more, but are only hugging, and not much else. We go round the back of the bar, past some

elderly divas of uncertain gender and colourful dresses, before reaching the other side back towards the dance floor, back to the windows we saw from the queue. Indeed, there's a view on the queue. It hasn't got any shorter and it's nearly 4am by now. We've barely settled on a nice position for people watching that Henry, not the usual dancer, goes onto the dancefloor. I'm left alone to observe the crowd. A group looking like Spanish tourists on the left, suitably numerous and short, trendy clean, yet fitting here, seem to be enjoying themselves. An older lady, or perhaps tranny, must be in her fifties or perhaps sixties, dressed like she's some decades younger, golden high heels and sequin top, is sitting at the bar, discussing with a well built back, of clearer gender, even if assessed from a rear view only. Grey hair can be guessed from the little that's left on his head. Have they been here since 1995? Essential to the ambience, if I was running such a club, and was failing to have a crowd, I'd hire some people like that. Younger ones on the right, looking very straight, and very much into the bleeping. Thinking of it, gravity defying tits previously encountered notwithstanding, few people are outstandingly pretty or even achingly alternative. Well, about a third of the crowd have sizeable tattoos, but so do sailors, according to the lyrics of most songs about sailors; but yet the place turns people who'd have collectively been not up to much, had they stayed at the nearby station waiting for a train, into a delightfully choreographed circus without a director.

Talking of circus, the space between the bench I'm sitting on and the bar, is now populated with a group of four very gay guys, in full regalia. One of them has a V neck top, going down to his belly button. Mid-thickness chest carpeting, maybe a competing school from the waxed open top models seen earlier downstairs, long chains around his neck, yet without quite falling into a distasteful faux-gangster look. All must be at the edge of middle age, like Henry and I. Chatting purposefully, far enough for me not to get the language for sure, though probably German, and they look even more certainly local than the elderly lady-thing at the bar, who's still there in the distance. The one on his left is in leather trousers, tight fitting leather top with gold band ornaments, though not quite a torero. Indeed I've not seen a torero outfit yet, after all it's not a fancy dress party. V-neck rummages his chains, at the bottom of one of which there are a few golden cylindrical ornaments hanging. He unscrews one of them carefully. This turns out to be a very ingenious device: the bottom part of the container has a supply of powder, presumably cocaine, and the top part includes a small length of pipe of two or three millimetres diameter, cut at an angle, so that it can act both as a spoon and as a substitute for a rolled dollar banknote for the sniffing phase. He shares a scoop with each of his friends in turn, spilling none. He screws back the container into jewellery, and they keep on chatting, so naturally and professionally recreated.

Henry has come back as the ingenious clubbers were moving away. It's been a while, I ask him if he's been dancing all that time. No, he's actually met someone! So I miss all the action as usual. I demand a report. He was back from a visit to the gents, and sat down to recover from the dancing for a bit on one of those pull down fifties cinema seats, when a twenty something girl, which he had noted as she was wandering with staccato moves on the way, hovers near him. She then sat down, one seat away. He said hello – which is no more a custom of his than it is of mine – and then he could barely stop her from talking. She seemed to be on something, given the jerky movements, and language. She's on a postgraduate program – “very business-like conversation”, I interrupt – and she complained her supervisor is a fascist. “How exotic, have we found a real nazi?” I ask. But Henry had no time to get to organise a zoo outing to see the professor, and anyway he could only look at her lips and wonder kiss/no-kiss. She was alert enough to convert the jerking energy to inconvenient head movements which kept him firmly in the thinking stage. And then, like a swarm of flies, a group of her friends came back, and a jerky flash she got up and disappeared within the swarm. “She didn't leave her card on the seat?” I wonder. I congratulate Henry nonetheless, and tell him he's been minutes away from meeting a possible wife, perhaps merely a question of dosage to achieve a more structured process next time. Anyway, better than me and my character studies.

Henry has settled downstairs in a comfy sofa opposite the bear bar, “where the bears get their beer”, I remark, weakly. It's by the loo and there seems to be some animation and lots of coming and going. The downstairs music is much more to my taste and I leave Henry to his observations and go to the dance floor. The dance floor is now to capacity, without being squashed like upstairs. I make my way and find myself a space not far from the speakers. Thankfully the speaker space has no particular crowd magnet effect. Somehow incredibly, it seems not everyone is a bass or vibration addict. Most of the fellow dancers are topless, and after some moment of observation I realise the dance floor seems to be split between a gay and a straight section. Or perhaps youth/middle age section as the gay section is distinctly more mature. The mix works well. The DJ, emerging in the distance from the hole in the concrete, is a moderately padded bloke, in his thirties, who looks trustworthy, a good candidate for a son in law who could have been working as an insurance agent. It's an established scene, I guess. The big strobe flashes from the ceiling, it's a public flashing light bath. Suddenly the crowd is intermittently illuminated, which is like being flashed glimpses of normality as shadows of the crowd's outside selves flash in front of my eyes. Hipsters whose excess hipsterdom melts in the darkness, the too many Addidas logos, almost clash joyfully against the muscular open tops reminiscent of the eighties gay disco of cinematic fame.

As the flashes are replaced by blue and red swipes of light, I notice a guy who seems to be on a chat up session with a middle eastern type of girl in a red skirt, shortish but not too short, mid length dark hair, not quite my canonical type but instantly fanciable. A Japanese couple moves in front of them, blocking the view. I turn and go back to dancing, no fun in being the retarded stalker. But soon after, I can't help looking again. She's talking with a tall girl who she seems to be with. Probably early twenties if at all. Not unattractive in a way that makes you feel sorry for what could have been. A figure that suffers, just, from a tad too much padding. Breasts not far away from being nice. Face a bit too youthful and just a little something away from the right proportions – the near miss is her theme. She cannot sustain the comparison with Red Skirt. In the meantime the guy working on Red Skirt seems to be progressing, getting closer and seemingly maintaining her interest in the chat. While keeping on dancing, one can only admire the technique. And then he kisses her. I turn a bit and dance away. A minute or so later he's kissing her again, Tall Almost Cute is somewhat static in her movements, looking at her friend being taken care of. Feeling unloved? I move and ask to her ear “Do you feel left alone?”, almost immediately feeling it must be the lamest chat up line in the history of mankind. Luckily, she doesn't seem to understand. I repeat. Probably still not understood. Thankfully. But she looks at me and smiles. I get closer. She doesn't move away. I hesitate and then, in an instant, French kiss her. Brief but nice, though the amateurism of youth lets itself be felt. Surprised at myself, I had never been from “hello” to kissing in less than a minute ever before. I ask her name, and don't understand even the second repeat. Te-something. Go figure. Red Girl's boy is dancing behind her, she ends up turning and kissing him again. She's squeezed between us. He briefly takes his hand from her bottom to mine. Ah yeah, it's the place, I think as I push it back softly, and keep on dancing. Soon after, she's talking with her friend. And soon they are disappeared from the crowd. I go back to Henry in his sofa at the Bears' Bar to recover and tell the tale.

“There's a group of guys who don't stop going in and out of the toilet, it's making me dizzy. I can't figure out what they're doing.” he says, as he describes the outcome of his observations. “Looking and failing to find a coke hit? Regular attention deficit disorder?” I hazard. He notes that the going-ons in this bar alone have the potential for three or four Ph.D theses. But this is a diversion, I want to tell my tale. He wants a drink. Friends need to be there when you want to boast. I spoil my telling while he's waiting for his beer. I don't think he was quite listening. We move on. Back to the other side of the main room through that cagey metal bridge across the entrance pit. “It could have been speed,” I add to the earlier discussion about the meandering bears, “this is supposed to get you into obsessive pointless behaviour, next hit notwithstanding.” He answers “Look! There's a staircase, here, behind these

swings.” Oh, indeed! We go up as a big black tranny in feathers walks down. There's an ice cream stand up there, a few quiet seats, and a window with a view on the downstairs bar and, at an angle, the main floor. As he orders, I admire. Couple of hipsters to my right. Short. Spanish? “Where's the toilet?” Oh, they've just arrived. I direct them to the Bears' Bar. Henry comes back with his ice cream, beaming.

Upstairs. Downstairs. Sitting. Dancing. Light. Flashes. We're getting tired and rest for a moment at the bar. On the dance floor opposite I see Tall Almost Cute, kissing Red Skirt's boy passionately. She's into it today, and everything hints she's probably quite a normal girl, probably on the shy side, outside. Red Skirt has disappeared. If I had any energy and balls I could have contemplated suggesting a swap. “That's the girl”, I tell Henry. “Which girl?” he answers, and has another sip of his beer. I almost start the tale from scratch, but don't. “I'll go for a last dance”, I say, and move onto the floor. Tens of minutes pass. Tall Almost Cute is sitting on a deserted podium. She notices me, and walks up to me. We manage a brief chat. “Yes, I have a job” – all right, does she think I'm of student age? Ah, Terske, she's called. Sounds unusual, no surprise I didn't get it. We swap phone numbers. I'm not sure she quite got that I don't live here. She goes away, and sits down on a deserted podium. I keep on dancing. As I look back, she's standing; kissing Red Skirt's boy again.

We get down the staircase, it's some time past 8am. The cloakroom desk is reasonably orderly. This is a fairly civilised form of chaos, although clearly more fuzzy than when we arrived. We're a bit fuzzy too. We get out. The schoolmaster is still on the door and there is still a queue, if now a fairly short one. Young, mildly dishevelled this time. I guess the door policy is relaxing a bit now. Some guy is arguing they have to go elsewhere as his girlfriend, barely standing, can't get in. Civilised. We walk back, past the DIY car park, the boxy warehouses, the Eastern Block blocks. There's a flea market in front of the station, not even one primarily for trendies. It's a Sunday morning crowd: pensioners on their morning walk, tourists fresh from their hotel breakfast with the guidebook in hand. We get to the train. It comes quickly. The day has clearly more than started. It's a funny mix. Some fellow clubbers. More tourists. A family with 3 kids on a day's outing. A homeless guy. A cheap airline's stewardess with her carry on case. It's not at all surreal. “I don't like techno, but OK, that was good”, says Henry, to no-one in particular.

Home sweet home

I've been back in London for a few days. At home checking emails, there's a message from Elisa. I've seen her a couple of times since she pissed on me. It got clear quite quickly she's a lost cause, but we get along nicely. And more than that, she's slept with Henry when they started meeting up and it would have been odd to share a pint that closely. And good for self esteem to have an excuse, as if I was making a choice myself. I write her a synopsis of the Berlin club fisting thing. I have a sense that this is going to become the mother of all anecdotes. It's pointless and ridiculous but hey, it is the privilege of the ordinary peasant to be able to make a feast out of the frailest turkey.

I log back onto another dating site I have joined recently, the one Henry met Elisa on. It is a tad quirkier than my usual haunt, smaller crowd but overall nicer, and a quirky crowd is good. Somehow the home base has a format that pushes people into a sort of serious search for a missing partner, almost turns it into a job search, or advert copy, which evidently tends to make people present themselves as pretentious dicks, while being utter identikit bores.

Here there's a rating system, which I use as a reminder to self: 5 stars: wow, 4 stars: looks nice, I should write to her at some point, 3 stars: ok, would shag if no major defects get unveiled in person, but I can't be bothered filling in the application form, or if I've been bothered once, I won't be again, 2 stars: wouldn't, due to being too ugly, a religious nutter, a complete idiot, etc. 1 star would have to be outstandingly dire, and I'm a nice guy, so they're even rarer than the five stars.

First step of the routine: I'm looking at my stalkers, as they neatly call people who've looked at your profile. The name of the feature may not last long, I sense it's probably going to be politically corrected as soon as they grow up and become part of the establishment. Well, it shows those that are not in stealth mode, perhaps I have three thousand secret admirers. I get very few that are not the people I've looked at myself. Oh, I don't recall that one: 46 years of age, and looks it, quick scan at the profile, witty, literate, but no thanks, really. The air must be getting rarefied at that age. Now a 37 year old, Lisbon. Almost exotic. Not too bad. But sorry I'm not flying to Lisbon just for a date. In theory why not, but it would just put too much pressure if one

does it with too much intent, without being properly prepared for a flop. It could be combined with a weekend away, though the logistics of having a potential failure as the centre-piece of a loner's weekend away is slightly tricky. Moreover if it does work out, it's a logistical nightmare in perspective, and environmental destruction on an unprecedented scale, unless one party can move, which opens a whole other can of worms. The remaining stalkers I think I looked at or wrote to recently. Well, no spammer at least. Don't know how they do it, but you get very few spammers on this site. The odd recruitment drive to a porn site, the odd Russian twenty year old photo fishing for some pay site, but they do seem rare. Well done for a free site, I guess they just need to be a bit better than the competition to send the spammers onto easier targets.

Browsing fatigue. I've got twelve tabs open, again. Some day a Chancellor of the Exchequer looking at something inelastic to tax will hit open tabs in web browsers. It's easier to choose a picture for further study than to actually study. Too much choice makes people unhappy, that's well known. I go through a clean-up cycle and close those that really don't look like I'd want to meet up with them. Still five that are OK, three I had rated previously which makes my stalker count go up. But I barely remember them, funny how the other side can't know if you look at them because you're obsessed or because you just can't remember and immediately see a problem, and think "ah, that evangelical Christian who wants to start a German shepherd breeding farm!", or someone who's far too obvious on the need to settle down and start a family, like, yesterday. OK it's a bit of an emergency for women in their mid to late thirties but I recommend discretion. Still five tabs to go, and then move on to a mobile phone review site. The gentleman's comfort. Phones and women, how similar. Some look nice. Some not so much, but look interesting while being within reasonable weight limits, and sometimes have nice features the lookers don't. Compromise, compromise. I guess we're handbags to them.

I've yet to write to any of them. But I'm getting weary. Open another window into the cinema, for a bit of escapism. It's that or I should find a girl who also doesn't have a television, we could do some bonding feeling pseudo intellectual. Thankfully, I never spend hours hopping around mindless junk on the internet. My local cinema proclaims proudly that it is the 'best in London'. Screen one is indeed a very nice room. And rarely crowded. Is there a dating film perhaps? Nope. I look around some more. Pierrepont, the story of Britain's last executioner. That should cheer me up. It starts in half an hour, perfect timing for a snack and a little excursion. I put on the first set of socially acceptable clothes I find. Sweatshirt doesn't seem to smell. Good. I check I don't have some leftover food on my face. This mirror needs cleaning. I only clean – if we can call my cleaning cleaning – the flat when I have the

idea that a girl I'm meeting might stay over, however improbable. I need a date otherwise this mirror is going to lose its power of reflection.

I am late, no queue at the ticket booth. I've got a grand theory that the staff here are recruited on looks. Arty farty arts centre, but menial jobs, ideal for middle class students or the wives, or former spouses, of fallen aristocrats, or discarded Sanskrit teachers facing a shortage of offers in their chosen profession. The ticket woman, wearing her middle age quite comfortably, is still cute. Lovely mid-length red hair. Just the right amount of wrinkles. Would. Looks suitably intellectual, though not Sanskrit level. She has a suitable middle class accent, and a slight slowness with operating the card machine, which adds something. I walk down to the hall, wondering if I'm allowed to interpret a commercial smile as a flirty one. The usherette, yes I can seat anywhere, could be her daughter. Would too. Both at the same time would be heaven. It's red hair day. Almost tight fitting black uniform, quite suiting. Even the discrete orange logo highlights well. Front matter appears promising, yet barely hinted behind the loosely buttoned-up blouse. But she must be an undergraduate, or worse.

The film has started. So I can't stalk the patrons and make up mental stories about their lives. I'll have to just watch the film.

So. Pierrepont is a bit grim. A hanging geek, following in his father's footsteps, he's also blessed with a dysfunctional marriage. He got a bit weary of all those killings. Surprise! He definitely couldn't have worked as staff for the cinema, or perhaps on the steam engines below. Or upstairs. I go through the clean concrete spiral staircase. It is still immaculate, where are the graffiti teenagers? Middle class density around the Barbican frightens them away? House maintenance spraying them clean a few seconds after they're made? It is a mystery.

Outside, it is empty and dark. Thin London rain. I need a walk, and go round St Paul's way. Middle of London and it's desert at this time. I own a cathedral. The emptiness is a bit weary. I'm slightly hung up on life after all those hangings. Melancholia. There's a cleaner worker type at the bus stop, but I avoid having poetic thoughts about social classes.

I loop back through Smithfield. More workers. A refrigerated truck is open, with full size carcasses waiting in line, patiently. The small greasy spoon opposite lights up the street. Our resident beggar, long, weary, bearded, breaded, red beret on, looks like he's been around there since coming back from the Korean War. Almost comforting. Does he still exist? Is absent-mindedness bliss? Probably not.

I was getting too cold, and walk up the stairs home. Cold little miserable place, it feels like, just now; despite not being at all miserable really, but you'd like a few more rooms and someone around. So back to the internet. It's like inside is going back outside. The street has disappeared and the world is stored inside the computer. So what to do? Watch porn, read geek websites, or go back to the dating tabs? Maybe Juliette is in there and could be lost if the browser crashes.

Oh, an advert for speed dating. That's targeted advertising for you. Maybe I should try that as well. I spend some time around the web researching the concept. An article in a broadsheet: the journalist had fun, besides spoiling the party. Her 'dates' varied between the one looking for a quick shag, or claiming to, and some randomly normal, "it's difficult to meet people in London because we're working all the time" London types. She wasn't freaked out, but safely returned to her boyfriend afterwards. Don't they have a proper single journalist who could study the thing more in depth? Reporting should be more embedded for such crucial topics.

I've found some specialised search engine with all the events, not slick, looks like the labour of love of a dedicated nerd. One has to do what one has to do. There's a few most nights of the week, and at weekends, in London. Some thematic. Twenty quid a night seems the going rate. Sounds a tad expensive for just coordinating thirty single people going to a bar at the same time. Well they match the gender count and perhaps avoid some jokers. I go through the organisers' websites. Dire design, dire photos of painfully mainstream people getting drunk. "Meet like-minded people!" Being single and having a spare 20 quid is sure to make for a great sense of communion. Well, there are age groups as well.

At least it should be less amenable to bad surprises looks-wise compared to online stuff, as very little deception is even possible, give or take the limitations of dimmed lighting and crafty make up. That said, should we care, after all good looks do not correlate with anything else which makes a good relationship. Attractive people are not more interesting, or better in bed, or better companions, or anything really other than the eye candy aspect, even on average they should be worse at all the rest, given they have an easier life mating up – and what else matters? – and thus have no need to improve themselves to become more desirable or console themselves from repeated defeat on the battlefield. They may be marginally healthier in so far as our instincts proxy that well, but that seems a bit weak, it may have been better to evolve a DNA scanner or X-ray eyes. That said I don't think my dick would pardon me if I tried to go for the clever and passionate fattie with a smashed asymmetrical face. Such is the tyranny of the biochemical straitjacket.

I almost book an event, but I am still no impulse buyer, so I just end up saving the links for further research. The tabs with Juliettes have remained unworked, and then it's too late and I'm too sleepy to bother.

Highbury and Islington

We're in a grotty pub near Highbury and Islington tube. Large, corporate, faded looks, if any; transit punters add a shade of grey to the grey greens and grey browns. "It's got a beer garden!" Henry tries to argue, feebly. "Yes, but it's not much better for it", I reply pointing at the sadly aged garden furniture in a blank and rather dense courtyard. "You know it's crap", I add. "Yes, yes, OK. But actually," he says, suddenly enlightened, "it's exactly like Woozle." We're seeing Woozle a bit later in the evening, and that's our meeting point. "he has his merits but you don't want to see too much of him," continues Henry, "in fact I might have seen enough of him already, oh well." I ask why he invited him tonight, then. "He invited himself, and, you know, he's not so bad that I'd actually want to make an active effort to avoid him. Must be bored or something." "But he's Mister Social, how come he needs us?" I inquire. We speculate that there's a lot of nights in a year, and it's like a quota to reach, no mean feat, and he seems to get quite a lot of his shags from online, like us, though he does have a better hit rate. "Thinking of it, I'm not sure I recall a story where he met someone online and didn't shag them." remarks Henry, and continues: "It tells us that being a bit of a prick does sell more than it takes custom away" followed by a contented silence, as a satisfying state of understanding the world has been reached.

If there's something not too badly designed in this pub, it's the waitress I am ordering our next beers from. She's a bit chubby, looking a bit dense, but probably quite practical and with good common sense, and too ordinary to be ugly. "Stop being such an arse" I think to myself. She struggles with the cash register far away but does come back with the correct change. I get back to our table.

Henry explains that the last girl he met from online was embarrassed about being a tenant. She got into a rather long winded explanation before admitting that she has a flat in the Oxo tower, which must be the most prime social housing in the entire country. No river views though, but being at the back she gets sunshine. That's perfect social equality: sunshine or river views. She's got some minor, albeit invisible, disability, he says, and that's how she got into a good position in the waiting list. It's social housing, so a similar rent to some nondescript flat in a sinking estate with a view on a brick wall,

therefore it has to become meritocratic. I tell him it makes a nice change to have alternative rat races, at least some little chance is left if you lose in the main one. "Socialism is all good, but how did the date part of the date go? Are you moving in?" I ask. He says that it was polite but he didn't really get into her, not even metaphorically. It was an afternoon appointment, which tends to be quite businesslike. She left after an hour and a half with an errand to go on to, fair enough. She looked at him strangely when she said goodbye. How to read that? "Well we need to find you specs with a built-in spy camera, of course, so that I can study the video", I suggest. "Right. Do the underlying semantics of odd glances transfer to films, or pixels? Perhaps you have to come and position yourself behind a newspaper," he replies, "else, I could just introduce you as my butler. But anyway do people make odd looks if they don't care?" He argues she might have just been embarrassed, or have a facial expression directed by matters unrelated to him. I reply it makes more sense at the beginning than on parting, she should look more relieved. "Didn't look like relief", he says. "Well, she was into you, I guess. You've got a flat in the Oxo tower waiting for you! I'll help you with the move." He mumbles, lack of enthusiasm, nondescript, all right but no click. "Man, she doesn't have any active defect. With attitudes like that, it's no surprise so many people are badly housed in London", I say. He retorts you need a few active qualities, if oblique ones. "If she calls me back, I might..." I interrupt him, "but they don't, in general, and she was embarrassed about living in the Oxo tower. That type never calls back."

Moments later, Woozle arrives. He starts chattering about his latest, probably doomed business venture. He plans to sell foldable cardboard seats to people going to Glastonbury. "What if it rains?" Henry asks. He says that it's made using special, if not quite waterproof, tough cardboard. He says he's thinking of someone he met at a party who might be interested in paying for it. Thankfully for his investors, Woozle's ideas don't tend to leave the helipad – much less risk of damaging anything in transit that way.

We decide to move onto a dinky music venue that I don't know, but where Woozle, and more reluctantly Henry, think there might be a passable gig. An almost jovial doorman, eight quid per person, and down a flight of stairs. Bare brick, pretty mediocre Western-style decor attempt. But it's not unpleasant and a marked improvement on the pub. The first band are finishing, which may be a blessing. Indie guitar rock of some description, twenty somethings who've still got some hope, and have some fans, who may or may not just be their mates. Small place, three bands, six friends each, that makes a crowd for this size of venue, but it might be a bit short for fame and glory. There's some pugnaciously random after-work crowd as well, so after all, it's a pretty bearable mix. I stare, in as unstalkery a manner as I can, at a tallish ginger girl, late twenties, delightful bosom, who is not even badly

dressed.

Henry has seen the last band before and says they're not half bad. In the meantime, we've got The Red Wellies, pretty pleasant guitar rock too. I wouldn't mind if they played in the tube, I say. The tall ginger girl is with band-member type guys, I'll keep to stalking I think.

Woozle points to a couple of women, probably early forties, or late thirties with lots of smoking under their belts, somewhat working class, but also somewhat dressed up. A taller, if really mid-height, slimish one matched with a round but not quite yet disgracefully fat companion. The seemingly fading features are not unpleasant in the darkness after all. He says that they look like they'd be up for anything. Henry doubts it, I'm more inclined to siding with Woozle on this one; the impression is confirmed after they order their next drink with a revealing enthusiasm. We watch the band a bit more, still enjoyable. Henry and I talk about the fatefulness of youth until we realise Woozle is in conversation with the up-for-anything pair. We missed the entry strategy completely, what's the point of having a master around if you don't take the opportunity to learn something? Anyway we join in, the easy and lazy bit. North Londoners, after work indeed, much about nothingness, I don't even catch the bit about the job before the talk moves on to the band.

During the break, Woozle, Henry and the short and round one, go outside for smoking. Round one tells me while moving away "Your nose looks like my husband's!" It confirms the anything goes theory, it seems. I sense a fly in the ointment of that marriage, if temporarily. So I'm left with tallish skinny one. She asks my name, I tell her, she doesn't quite understand it, she tells me hers, I don't quite understand it. "Why do you still have your jacket on?" she asks. I explain that I don't necessarily plan to stay all night and can't be arsed to queue for or even find the cloakroom, plus, I think to myself, I don't know, these two are a bit edgy and it's a tad uncomfortable, so I might leg it sooner than later, if the situation doesn't remain alluring enough to make it worth some potential unpleasantness. We continue talking at each other, with lots of loss on the line, it's not the quietest of gigs. Which makes us quite close, and she's a bit touchy, her left hand moving on and off my arm as if she was a morse code telegraphist. She's at my height as well, a plus of tall girls. The conversation takes a sudden turn, "are you gay?", she asks. It's a bit unexpected, maybe I missed some essentials to line noise, but it can't be clearer and, well, what else can I do – I have to kiss her. Full blown French kiss, she's that enthusiastic. Nice to be the guy smooching in a club for once. It lasts enough to almost forget where I am. Little break, it's fun but where do we go from here, I wonder in silence, saved by some judicious hugging. I probably don't want to sleep with her, and what if the hubby is not accommodating, I presume she's on a similar setup as her girlfriend. Speaking

of which, Henry just appeared, having just run down the stairs, appearing weary. “Her friend passed out outside”, he tells me. I manage to report the news and she follows him back upstairs, I feel like someone took the remote control and changed the channel.

A couple of songs later, Henry comes down, the other girl has regained consciousness, and it was just that she's very drunk, he thinks. They seem to want to keep on going and get back in, but the bouncer won't let them. Woozle is still with them. I report my side of the happenings, “that was quick”, says Henry, surprised, though perhaps not as much as I was. I remark that I find that is enough action for the night. As we emerge back on the street we see the pair, and Woozle, entering a taxi, doors closing, and soon driving away into the yellow wet darkness of North London.

Baby daddy

I eventually decide to try out the speed dating thing. I've done more research. There are thematic editions, such as 'Older men for younger women'. That must be popular. Various religions get their own events, what a silly thing: I think people should interbreed more rather than less. And then there's niche themes, like gym bunnies, or even a book lovers' event. Could do that, that's as acceptable a religion as they come. The last iteration of that particular one was two months ago and there's no new event soon enough. Are all the literary types too shy for speed dating? 'Elite Professionals', that's the money one. They want 40 quid instead of the usual 20, and the punters are supposed to have an above average income but they seem to check only that you can afford the 40 quid, which should be accessible to the cautious poor. No discount for gold-diggers so I guess it's more like high power chicks meeting high power blokes, in so far as much power can be afforded with two twenties. There must be a rich guy meets cute pauperette somewhere. I'm curious, but not going to start with that sort of wastage, so I book a regular twenty quid one, for professionals, as generic as it gets. No one seems to advertise chav-centric events, how do these good people mate, I wonder? Credit card number, click, I'm booked for Tuesday next week. We'll see.

Skype icon blinks. It's Arizona Tina. What time is it in Phoenix? She's got an hour to kill while doing the laundry and the kids are at football training or some such sport thing. It's hot, she complains. "Well, surprise, you should have picked Toronto", I reply. "No shit, I did date a canuck when I was in my late twenties, but he was a complete loser" comes the answer. "I can't believe you dated a complete loser, so out of character. Loser, possibly, and by accident, but complete, no." She explains she's been young and foolish, to which I reply I can't believe she's ever been foolish. "Perhaps it's God's handicraft that you ended frying in the desert, saved only by air conditioning." Maybe Arizona is a purgatory, at least it seems to her that quite a few of her work colleagues must have committed something reprehensible in their previous lives. "Like being Christians?", I enquire. No they're still that in this life, she points out, or maybe it's reverse punishment for having had fun in the previous life. "Need to take the laundry back, BRB" suddenly appears in the chat window.

Back to the dating window. Should ask Tina what she thinks about this girl, tall, looks borderline manly, but the cleavage doesn't look made up. A somewhat strange face, albeit not enough to say tranny loudly. Profile between interesting and slightly edgy, go figure.

“Laundry done. Well half done but I need a drink and to sit down in the meantime. My knees are always such a pain” Tina types coming back. We chat a little while about knees and forthcoming surgery, hoping for the best. I ask her to vet the bit-manly-girl for a tranny check. Send link. Privacy wall, need to save profile, copy-paste picture working around the crude anti right click measures. “So? What do you think?” “She's a handful. Definitely not a tranny, looks a bit funny, that's all, but lot of us look a bit funny on occasion.” “Should I book her?” I type. “Go for it. Might be funny but looks OK and probably not boring. And you'll have some tale to tell me afterwards!” “Talking of tales how's the love life?” She explains she went out the other night with her mate Tracey – whom she's known all the way from school – and they got somewhat intoxicated, ended up with these two guys, bit rough construction industry types. Tracey only dates short thick necks. “Anyhow for some reason I end up at that guy's place, not sure how, and he's like all over me. But I didn't dig him.” I state the obvious that it's sort of fair of him to have expectations, when you take someone home, that they might be at least temporarily interested. “Anyhow he fell asleep. I half slept some time. He was Irish, I looked up his passport he had left on the bedside table. While he was snoring.” Interesting to learn about someone by reading their passport. And then she left, “major shit finding a fucking taxi in some dump suburbia in heels.” But she did in the end. “Glam lifestyle, rockerette!” I add. “Yeah, need to do the second round of laundry in the meantime. Don't go.”

So I've returned to the odd tranny-not-tranny girl's profile, I think, blankly, for a moment, before a vaguely funny one liner comes to me. Send. We'll see. As Tina comes back from laundry duty, I tell her it reminds me that I need to change my sheets in case one of my prospects materialises, she replies “you know, a girl's sex life involves a lot of looking at the ceiling, especially with slow finishers, so, how clean is your ceiling? that's what you should wash!” I retort that my ceiling doesn't stink, and she advises me to just use a bit of deodorant for the sheets. She then reports on how exhausting a work trip to Tucson from Phoenix was, despite the immaculate sheets – and ceiling – in the hotel there. I take a diversion on how much better public transport is in old Europe, however crap at times it has become in good old Blighty. She yeah-buts the whole thing unconvincingly. She can get slightly itchy about the motherland, curiously. It reminds me of that website about white trash at Walmart's, I throw a link in a chat window, and we enjoy a bit of laughing at the less fortunate. Plus it makes us feel clever, the world is at least fair in that it's easy to find someone who's more of a loser than you. “And thinner”, adds

Tina, who is, in dating terminology, *average* though still of a fairly good standard of maintenance for a MILF, and an American one at that. "But there must be a poor guy at the very bottom, who has no-one worse than them." No worries, she answers, they probably can't open a door let alone face existential questions. I tell her that I wish I could switch off the existential questions, to which she replies: "You wouldn't exist if you didn't have those, they are who you are, you won't escape!" I sigh textually.

"Talking about white trash, what about baby daddy, still with that hairdresser girl?" I enquire. "Don't. He just can't help parading her around." I say that she should feel some *schadenfreude* from the downgrade. "Would you do her yourself?" I ask. She dispatches it with a smiley. "See, there's good in that." I continue that it looks a bit desperate of him, urgently finding anything younger, jumping on the first vaguely attractive thing that walked past and responded positively, but that can't be that nice on a day to day basis, bit like a room with a nice view but in a boring place and with nothing to do, nice to have but you can't just live for the view. I add that some people just hate emptiness and will want anyone rather than care about what they get. Something is better than nothing. "I hope he didn't marry me just as a filler for holes in the plastering of his mind". "You're being poetic now! Did you meet in the DIY store in the filler department?" I ask. I remember that my kitchen drain is almost blocked, and the shower too, and off-handedly remark I need to go to the DIY store to buy some of this acid stuff. "Don't, it nukes your drains", writes Tina. "Really?" I'm sceptical. It's shaking the foundations of my belief in gender equality. "Ask any plumber! I know more about this shit than I should, did all the work on the house ourselves. And now can't wait getting out, and getting this whole divorce thing done."

"Divorce, divorce, you dig divorce." I type. "Don't. Mock. Me. And it had it's good days," she says, "when it worked it worked 100%. 110% even. It's just that one day, or one year really, I can't pinpoint the date it stopped working. He wouldn't tolerate me anymore, and I wouldn't him." "But you did leave in the end, and then he made all that fracas to get you back?" "Yeah but that's just men being dicks. They just can't decide, and are freaked out by change. Plus the shit with his work folks, I was like a car that had broken down, or that turned out to be slower than what his mates bought. That was one of the things: he wanted me to stay at home and be the perfect housewife. Like an accessory to his life. Well I can understand, just during the last year of college I had a boyfriend like that. All my girlfriends were settling, so I got drunk, OK-looking guy, loser, no job, no ambition and smelly. Nice dick though." I interject that "Size matters!" A "yep!" comes back. She continues, saying that they just lie to the small dick ones out of raw consideration. I tell her about the profile that was written as a nice short story about a girl in a random bar picking a random guy, getting drunk and taking him home on

the basis that 'dick is dick'. I wrote to her asking if she did a t-shirt, and she didn't answer. She seemed cool, despite a shady picture which revealed nothing. "I want that t-shirt too, go and have it made, and order two!" says Tina. "I don't think it will go well at the parent-teacher thing will it?" "But my dear, you know how adept I am at juggling incompatible identities." I tell her, "You're versatile in more ways than one..." She complains that her knees need to be more versatile, not all the other shit.

From superpowers to superhero, it reminds me of an incident, and I ask if I told her about the Superman mishap. Nope, she says. "Just another little bit of nothingness, but I was in that club downstairs from mine," – "the camel place we've been to?", she interrupts. "No, proper big famous club," I correct "and as I was upstairs some girl-guy walks to me, not full kit drag but clearly presenting female, and tells me some thing I missed and then that I looked like a superman." – "you've scored then?", she asks – and I continue that no, she was too manly a girl for me, going too fast anyway, in a typical man's way, and the only thing I found to say before cautiously escaping was "you too" which might not be such a compliment to someone displaying a girl identity. "LOL!" she writes. "Fuck, have to go and grab the boys, see you later, superman!" pops up before her icon greys out.

Red Skirt

I'm late as usual. It's a thin drizzle on the Millennium bridge. The crowd is sparse, too, at this time of the evening, despite the weekend. Is there a single Londoner here? Short, stocky Mediterranean arse in front of me. Stocky bald hubby and two kids to match. I negotiate overtaking on the left. There should be a fast lane, how can a world class capital city function at tourist sightseeing pace? Indeterminate far eastern student-age girls, bit young, sober stylish, agreeably cute, pass by. Hong Kong? or Wapping? Who knows? Too young anyway. In any event, being on my way to a date I should switch off the scanner. So the tranny-not-tranny it is. Mix of curiosity and apprehensiveness. I go past the beggar at the front of house slot. He has a magnificent view of the City, and lots of footfall with plenty of naive tourists, I wonder if it's a highly fought over premium spot. She texted earlier she's by the bridge, so she should be easy to find.

She's waving from the river bank, easy indeed. "Hi." Cheek kiss hello. Tall. Big frame. Still, proportions are kept within reason. Boobs. Boobs! Cleavage! That's going to be hard work. Is that a sign of desperation? Cleavage tends to come on date two when the girl has decided she wants to do you, rather than on the first meeting. But there are exceptions. Weaker middle bit, that has a bit of spare padding. OK, well. Red skirt is big. Good to get noticed I guess. But definitely not tranny after all. Nevertheless I can imagine that under the cover of darkness some confusion might arise.

So we enter Tate modern. Start of date nervousness. That's annoying. I need a drink. It is too early to skip the entire pretending I'm interested in art. Not that I'm quite completely uninterested, but it's a bit of an effort when mixed with dating. At least I've not been researching the exhibition like a student as that friend of Henry's has. Perhaps we should go straight to drink and then do art. Or maybe do pot dates and go and see some psychedelic stuff afterwards, and that way everything would be 'wow'. But it's not, we move towards the Turbine Hall. The artist had a crack sledgehammered into the concrete floor. We walk over it. I mention that a visitor got injured falling, according to the papers.

"Yeah. I need a drink" she exclaims not so long after. That was quick, I quickly nod and we're off to the upstairs bars. In the lift I feel some sense of

mismatch. With heels she's a bit taller than me. I guess we're 'interesting'. Nobody scorns. Nobody would.

It's a bit crowded upstairs. We manage to reach the bar nonetheless. It might take some time to get served. The work talk is actually more intriguing than usual. She works in licensing enforcement for Camden council. "Is that the most glamorous job in local authority?", I ask. "Yeah you get to know some characters", she says, but adds that it's really lots of boring adminstrivia. I have to shift myself to reach the bar and attempt an order; let's try not to get an espresso, like I got last time I was there and asked for a wine spritzer.

She's originally from Leeds. I've been there. She's been in London since uni, not lived abroad, done some unspecified jobs then fifteen years council. Doesn't get on well with her bosses at the moment, so is in a state of flux looking for something else. I say I thought it was quasi jobs for life in the public sector. She says that they can fire you, find something that will do, whatever the rules say, and they can make your life shit, if they wish. I concur that'd be worse, it may be time to leave. Finding a job is a bit like dating anyway, just more formally dressed and you can't moan about exes, I say I feel much more ready for my next job interview since I've dated a bit. "Remember: don't make out with the interviewer!" she remarks. "Yeah that's why they don't do job interviews on coaches, I guess", I add. A bloke, thirty something, oozing money so strongly that he could not even pretend art enthusiasm, with blonde in tow, pushes past, or overtakes should I say, leaving a trail of arrogance. Here to impress the blonde with culture. Looks like it could work. Maybe I'm jealous. Why, though? Red Skirt is a dyed blonde after all.

"It's stuffy in here, let's move on", she declares. And she's right. We've been here about 17 minutes. Fast woman. We get back out and down along the Thames. "We're doing the dream walk along the South Bank", I say while signing the inverted commas, "that's the essence of online romance if I'm to believe the profiles on the site, but I don't think it was in yours." She replies "Thanks for reading it!" High treason, and I don't even offer a feeble excuse for fellow members of my gender class only looking at the pictures.

The direction she sets appears decisively uncertain. She's interesting enough I barely feel any urge to scan the crowd. She leads up concrete stairs, to one of the big riverside art venues' bar. "It's gonna be closed." I suggest. But it isn't. It's packed, in fact, but we find a place to sit down. I ask her if the couple next to us are on a date. Burly middle Englander guy, pink striped business shirt, with passable but boring market town blonde. They do look a bit out of character there. She thinks they could be genuine work colleagues, without subtext, "or will that take a proper drunken work Christmas party for

something to surface?”, I ponder. She suggests they could be siblings or cousins with one, or both of them, on a visit from the provinces. Yes, could be.

I notice a bit of her ear is missing. Doesn't look painful and long healed. I don't dare asking what sort of incident caused that. Earlobe cancer? An unusually passionate lover? I start to think about the implausibility of our encounter. I would never meet anyone like that in regular offline life. We discuss the last film we've seen. Matchpoint. Woody Allen at his darkest. I suggest it's not credible that someone would manage to go through murder and faking on that scale without getting nervous, or whatever, enough to get caught by anyone, except people in ferocious denial, for whom reality is out of the window anyway. She replies that escaping the most improbable situation is the plot of virtually every Woody Allen film, and she adds that she's met pretty good fakers, and plain psychopaths, in her time. The very middle class crowd around us could be taken out of the film, but my brain is too busy on cleavage watch – painstakingly trying not to stare at a date's showcase like a retard – that I can't be distracted into looking for a murderer among the patrons.

After a while of the conversation meandering back to the more accountably precise world of NHS funding cuts, she almost brusquely announces she needs a toilet break. Plenty of time for people watching now, it's kind of comfortable here, despite the cold metallic decor, saved just by the safe muted browns and greens so fashionable to the middling sort. The nearby table fit suitably in, middle management in Sainsbury's head office, with an eye for own brand packaging design, perhaps; they do match the curtains precisely.

She's taking a while on that toilet break and perhaps becoming a lone stalker in a late bar is going to feel strange. Has she left? No, I can't possibly be bad enough to be worth leaving her jacket, bright red of course, behind; and she was way too sober and seasoned a drinker not to find her way back. Perhaps she met some school friend she hasn't seen in 20 years? Whatever, whatever. Ah! She emerges, with a guy in tow. Has she pulled? It wouldn't be totally out of character.

They come back at the table, and she introduces Peter. Middle aged, well worn, looks gay, very; and generally agreeable. Not unlike an older version of me, must be mid forties. He has somehow lost his party and so we continue chatting as a trio. Quite original to introduce random strangers in a date. Customary introductions. He says he's a transport analyst, brought up in Birmingham. What does a transport analyst do I've always wondered. Turns out he works for the railway regulator. Makes sense. Before I can derail the

conversation into the realm of trainspotting, she steers us back onto the main line by saying she asked him, in the toilet's hallway, if she had seen him at the latest Gay Pride, he explains he failed to attend, "too much scene for me", but he's indeed gay. Glad she didn't pick a girl I might have fancied more than her.

Peter's quite enjoying himself and it's actually relaxing not to have to single handedly sustain the conversation. Maybe I should get him in as a dating assistant? It's getting late in this place and the staff is starting to make their 'it's going to be time to vacuum that sofa soon' impression. Peter suggests some friends told him there might be a DJ or something in the café of the Wayward Gallery, just a couple of buildings away upstream of the river. "Let's do that," she agrees, I'm not sure I've agreed formally but I would have if I had been asked. Sometimes it's difficult to say if people are rude or just use brain transmission to be in harmonious synch with you without having to ask.

Up and down more heavy concrete stairs. There's indeed a DJ and it's almost packed at the gallery's café. The crowd has got a good ten years younger, though it seems there's the odd grown up in a corner and at the back. Plus us. I go and order drinks for Peter and Red Skirt, and after a while waiting, I come back to see that it's not a threesome anymore but they've attached themselves to a group of art students, or perhaps only would-be art student types. She's in deep conversation with one, and I sit next to Peter who, finally, asks how I know her. "Online date", I reply, laconically. He's a bit astonished, amused, and apologetic about crashing in, though I'm glad he's in. I quite like him and try to show it's really OK, "it's fun, I'm not that social in real life, nice change", I add.

We're now outside, Peter saying goodbye just waiting for my date, who's disappeared, presumably to the toilet, again, according to our student informer. Fresh faced student, C cup, explains, God knows how she got to this topic, that she used to do cleavage but got tired of people staring. Good grief, even the tight top is enough to be wanting to stare, all good proportions, and cute round fresh face to top it up. The entire boob-loving section of humanity wants to be inside you, dear, I avoid telling her.

Red Skirt is back, the students say their goodbyes, and profusely she salutes Peter away. Maybe I should ask his number, he could make a good mate if not a dating assistant. But it's too awkward to do something about it.

"So what are we doing?", I ask, recovering my balance. "I need a drink! Other side of the river?" she declares. I tell her that I can think of a pub that might be passable at this time of night, broadly opposite to the East – but

London is hard at 2am, even on a Friday. We walk, pass the bridge, streets, the Strand, and not as slowly as I'd thought it'd take, Holborn. The pub I had in mind looks like it's closing and we're not too far from Smithfield now. I apologise for dragging her around in heels, not the most unwearable but still a good 2 inches. "Yeah, what the hell, I'm thirsty" she says, merrily.

One of my local pubs, the Horse and Anchor, I've kissed a couple of previous dates in there, it's not super lively, but fits well and it closes at 3am so we've got a bit of time. And I'm close to home and there's always taxis around to ship her back home, which may end up being the wiser course of action.

We find a couple of stools opposite the bar. Typical old England pub decor, Eastern European barmaid, or the more wholesome variety, this is a homely pub, and a more local looking young guy on the staff. She has a beer and I'm still on Gin and Tonic. "So it's near yours? I've never met someone who lives that fucking central." Yeah, it's okay, I reply, but it's tiny, that's the compromise. "My whole place would probably fit in the hallway of your suburban palace." She retorts "If I took all the shoes away, perhaps."

I'm starting to get tired. She's pretty content, here. Helpfully, she monologues gently about a work Christmas party they had last year at the Triangle bar a few doors away. She doesn't quite remember how it got there but it ended up with one of her more stocky colleagues, a big powerful bear from the buildings maintenance team she got an apparently non-sexual but fond relationship with – "he takes care of me" she says – to punch up one of her former managers, that had been a bit pushy in the past. I ask how it felt the morning after, "He was 2 weeks from moving on to another job, so well everybody kept a Great British Silence on the altercation and I got away with it," she replies, "but I still don't really know how it got that bad. He was a fucker but I'm not looking for trouble."

I just listen blankly, puzzled into a pause. "Do I frighten you?", she asks, congenially but I feel like she does want to frighten me, at least to a degree. I keep silent some more. It's awkward but I'm not really frightened, despite being one to be easily scared. She's actually almost totally non-threatening. Like a teenager trying to be hardcore and failing miserably. "Not quite." I answer. She laughs, and finishes her beer. Puts back the glass. We're on stools, she's less than a foot away, she moves, decisively as a seasoned boy would, and inserts her tongue into my mouth.

As we kiss, which is fairly nice, and good to have someone enthusiastic with nothing to do and no resistance phase to overcome; I start wondering what I'm going to do with that. She's interesting, a bit special, a bit nuts, has cleavage, but it's all a bit iffy, apparent harmlessness notwithstanding, and do

I really want to take her home? As the kiss closes the issue is unresolved. “I like you”, she says. It's now too late. I just keep on going and enjoy the game. We do the obnoxious making out couple until only a few other patrons are left. “OK, shall we go?” I ask, and she, unsure of her step, follows me. As we walk out and towards my place, I've got some doubt, like a hot flush, on whether it's a good idea but it's now clearly too late to change my mind, and a transversal look at her cleavage settles the matter for good.

“Yeah, okay, that's small”, she says after touring my room and adjacent facilities. “but perfectly formed!” I finish. I offer a glass of water, I think I have some wine but I don't think she needs any, and nor do I. She sits on the low bed absent-mindedly as I help her take her coat off, which takes a couple of attempts. I sit down next to her on the side of the bed and bring back my mouth against hers, and we do embrace positively pleasantly for a few minutes. As I take a break she lays down and takes off her remaining clothes. It's becoming a bit fuzzy, I'm half horny half puzzled half intoxicated – are three halves too many? – and get into the motions, on top of her. She spreads her legs apart I think condom but only half heartedly, and I get in, anyway. And at last I'm excited. Her breasts are round and full even laying on her back, standing their ground unusually well against gravity, for her age and mileage. She grumbles incoherently as I get inside her, I move to and fro a couple of times, and reason sort of interrupts, as a parent catching you. She may complain about the lack of condom, or not, she's not at the level of intelligibility where you could tell, but I'm hesitating too much, thought is the enemy of rigidity, and I quickly become as flabby as I am imprudent. I just turn over and lay down a bit. More undefined moans from her. I turn back and move subtly towards going down on her. I'm kissing her stomach below her navel, as the clear sound of snoring emerges from her open mouth, drooling gently, the soundtrack decisive and hoarse, as a perfect reflection of her daytime personality.

At the factory

Speed dating day is today. It takes place in some random bar near Piccadilly. 7pm is a bit of an early time for something that most properly belongs to the evening. I'm still in the office. Check the map online, and plot a snack en route. I think I'm a bit nervous. Retarded. It's most certainly going to be pretty useless, with a tiny probability to make any interesting encounter. No "what are you doing tonight?" office chit-chat, thankfully; but I almost wouldn't mind talking about it, despite the subtextual lameness intrinsic to the affair. Everybody here is happily married, or happily single, at least on the surface. Where are the juicy stories? In a parallel universe, no doubt.

The Central Line crowd is just bearable at this time, glad it's a bit past the evening peak. There's some workable material. Besuited City girl, mid thirties, false blonde but still fits, small tits but fits, stuck to her Blackberry, I bet she got married at 24 with an accountant and they happily live a well calibrated 45 minutes away off Victoria station. Would do, still. Ponder if anyone else is also going to my speed dating event. Stocky and flabby accountant type man, possibly. Spanish tourists, five pack, no. I disembark at Piccadilly.

The bar is large and deep, mainstream slick, a dark burgundy and grey colour theme, bland boxy furnishings, boring without being repulsively so. Where is the thing? I look around like a stalker, ah, here, at the end, an A4 home-printed sign with the company's logo pointing to a dedicated reception room at the back of the bar. I register at the desk, where I'm greeted by an Australian accent, typical Aussie backpacker type, 32 or thereabouts, blonde again. Boring but not repulsively so. Would. Shouldn't think about the hostess, after all it's the only one who isn't supposed to be available tonight.

The reception room has its own bar. I check the barmaid. OK, 22, eastern European, another blonde, we're getting into overdose territory here. A couple of female participants on the sofa far away, an awkward business type bloke at the bar, a short Indian guy looking at the table, hum, what to do? I go and get my free drink, hoping it will take a while. It doesn't, the service is swift. I stand awkwardly. It's too early and I'm too inept to chat with the girls outside of the programmed activities, and it's hardly any less gawky to chat with the boys, however less loaded it is. I settle for standing like a fly

wanting to be swatted at the bar after watching my phone indicating that there's four minutes before it's supposed to start. And checking it again one minute later. And again.

As the final guests arrive it's getting a bit packed and easier to be waiting at the bar. The hostess now explains how it works. We each get a number and a card, girls sit at a table with a number, boys go to their matching table to start with and then rotate to the +1 table every time the hostess rings a bell, every three minutes, with a break in the middle. We use our cards to keep a tab on who we meet, and then can go home and fill on the website 'yes/no/maybe' and the 'yes/maybe' matches get told of the hit and can contact each other, so that they can get married and be happy ever after – I suppose, she hasn't specified any final outcome.

So I'm number seven and sit at the matching table. First logistical problem: with girls permanently sitting, it's hard to assess whether they're 4 ft or 7 ft tall. Most girls are shorter than me, and while mostly any height under mine is good, it's nice to also be able to talk to your partner without needing a soap box to stand on, so I'm not that keen on the super short. Also the whole figure thing could be a bit misleading, and who knows if a vast bottom is not going to emerge when she gets up. What's the point of leaving the internet to have the same problems as on it? I will have to be carefully observant at break time.

So I sit at table 7. Dark girl, southern Europe probably, seems average, with some nice curves. I say "Hello", she says "Hi", matter of factly. The hostess finishes her explanations. I've not really rehearsed a standard discussion. What if I don't last three minutes? I should be able to find some trivialities.

"So, is it your first time coming to this sort of event?" she asks. Yes. She as well. We comment, brilliantly, that it could be a great way to get to know people, "yes we'll see", as if summarily dismissing her without even wanting to, after all I'm too busy with getting into the routine to be able to judge anyone at this stage. Quick. Quick. Quick. Find escape. "And what do you do?" She doesn't understand. "for a living?", I specify. That works, conveniently until the bell. Three minutes done. Saved. I smile at her awkwardly "cheers", digging myself in further. I turn, the next table are still talking. Well the bloke is still talking.

After some standing and repeat request from the host to move on, he does, and I sit at number eight. Classic blonde. Cute. Classic cute. Too cute. It's just the second one; I don't want cute yet. Try to reverse engineer what she might look like standing, medium height pleasant. Front bumpers are OK but not overwhelming, cute though. The type any bloke would do without blinking

for a moment. I try to compose myself, and choose the easy route, going direct to the what-do-you-do thing to avoid complications. It's not getting much smoother. She's a marketing consultant. Of course. She has studied. Not dumb blonde. Or maybe she is – marketing! – and I'm filtering out the obvious. At least she isn't hard work: she doesn't ask a thing about me. She's worked in Hong Kong, too. "It's quite competitive there I'm told", I remark, before the bell cuts me. I don't hog her like my predecessor and move on. I add a plus sign on my card. I should not do the card, only checking the people I remember afterwards should be enough. It's not promising if you don't even remember a potential lover within an hour of meeting them. But almost everybody is writing down earnestly something during the changeovers, as if they were going to be marked at the end.

It's starting to flow a bit more naturally. Typical chubby girl, but without proportionate boobs. Garish chequered shirt, teacher, Northern accent, she's quite cheerful in fact. But no way. I try to be polite, not sure I succeed, but she doesn't seem to notice. "Did you come on your own?", no she came with number 10. Bell.

Friend of teacher. Not so fat. But clearly uglier. Teacher too. "How long have you been living in London?", I ask, getting creative. Since Uni in Brighton. "So bright, Brighton.", I add. She doesn't seem to find it that funny. I finish my drink. By the break I may get intoxicated enough to enjoy the whole thing. It goes on, thankfully she talks, about Brighton. Salutary bell.

I move on, sit down; opposite a clear improvement. Modest chest, elongated face, plain but likeable. As the trivia questions pour in – Russian, journalist – she appears to be bordering on the positive. Is that someone I might like? She was assigned to Paris previously, loved it, and doesn't find London so impressive. Men, women, and the weather are all worse. It's even more expensive. Very little to save it. The conversation comes to a comfortable pace, when the obvious suddenly hits me, and after a turn, rushing to beat the bell, I manage to ask her whether she's here because she is writing an article about speed-dating. She doesn't hesitate long before admitting she is. Duh! She's probably properly boy-friended and stuff. "Oh, how amusing," I say, as the bell rings again.

"Another teacher?" I muse internally, looking at a slightly ugly, or perhaps more plain than ugly, girl sitting in front of me. Mid thirties, I presume. "Hi, I'm Sarah!" I greet her back; she's a talker, I only need to throw a couple of standard questions and she, quite skilfully, summarises her exceptionally ordinary life: born in Watford, former Polytechnic, worked in the City in a most vaguely described job in a prestigious brokerage, and now she works for the FSA. And she has a dog, Darren, a Teckel naturally, about whom she's

quite passionate. One wonders if the dog might be cleverer – funny how someone can mark themselves as underwhelming, for no distinctly factual reasons, in three minutes. The bell wakes me out of my bemusement.

Wow, what a change! A petite brunette, pretty shapely as far as one can guess from the sitting position, pleasantly and warmly pretty longish face, half length curly hair, all nice without being over the top and unattainable. And she can actually make a conversation, student in Antwerp doing a Ph.D in biology, as they do, staying at a London friend's, number 14, for the weekend. I'm charmed, which is probably making me look like an idiot, but I think I manage to maintain minimum service countenance. The ring comes quick, and she, after smiling, politely but decisively, goes straight to number 14, the London friend, the mate she came with it seems, so I avoid the possibly arduous situation of having to entertain her for the whole break.

But I have a break to fill, should I take refuge at the bar and hope it takes 15 minutes to order a drink this time, or chat up the waitress? I get there, enjoying sharp delivery, “What did you think of this first round?”, says a male voice behind me. I turn, early forties bloke, bit same shape as me, with an accent I can't quite pinpoint, probably southern Europe somewhere. I explain it's the first time I'm here, he's more seasoned he says, and short Indian guy who has apparently been here before and seems acquainted with him joins us, contributing a “Yes, it's all a bit of fun.” They both have been to quite a few of these events. Asian guy is in marketing – shouldn't he sell himself without the need for this, I ponder – and forties bloke is in sales at the options desk of an investment bank. I ask him if he's done number 12 yet, and query if she told him she's from the FSA? “Ah, she hadn't told me so. But, well of well, God forbid.” I concur that it's perfectly consistent with most of their staff being on a public sector pay scale, so they stand no chance regulating when their opposite numbers are way better paid and cleverer. He objects that pay doesn't make clever. Marketing guy interjects that his boss is well paid and dumb as hell. The host contributes a bell ring, and a loud call to our due positions.

So I'm with friend of cutie from before the break. Not so cute. No or little make up, plain M&S clothing, pink sweater, trousers hidden by the table, probably navy blue, looks like a true blonde, but one of those men won't drool over despite nothing wrong in a palpable way. Somewhat civil servant like. Could be a librarian. She's perhaps even more awkward than me. “So what do you do?” I fire after slightly too elongated a pause. “I'm in the navy,” she says. A murderer! Good god! I tell myself, before she adds “radio engineer.” OK, just a helper. “Lot of gadgets to play with, I guess, sounds fun”, I venture, pondering how the few women with so many men on a boat situation might pan out, but it sounds a bit too short for the 2 minutes that

are remaining, so I content myself with a short, and still truncated, introduction to radar technology.

As I sit down opposite number 15 I think this is the point where I got the routine sorted and I might have had enough drink to enjoy the situation. Perhaps one should drink beforehand, pity it's so early in the evening. "Hi, I'm Sarah", shouts a loud American accent. She's in business attire so I ask what she does. She explains matter of factly that she has just finished her MBA and now works for a green energy venture-cap outfit, combining, I seem to read in her gaze, greed with unbounded altruism in a particularly toxic way. Then she turns to purposefully firing questions at me. Age, job, ambition. MBA does job interview, like in class. I try not to look at her, nice curves one guesses from beyond the protection of a most business-like top, but she'd be impossible. Glad she's driving which keeps me from having to count time, but I'm glad at the bell. I end up with a probably not remotely credible, "Nice to talk to you" as she seems to have made her mind up even earlier, somewhat pissed off at having wasted three minutes of her precious life interviewing someone obviously not suitable for the job.

I move to the other end of the room as I'm back to number one. Younger end of the spectrum, bit rounded without being overly fat. Well, a girl. As the evening progresses I'm becoming more and more confused. Australian accent, "so how did you come to London?", I ask. She's just off the plane, it turns out, so to speak, and it is via Italy. So I inquire if she plans to stay, but no, she's there for a couple of months, off from London to Dublin next week. And doing speed dating. I'm all for casual, but is it really the place? Anyway simplicity sounds a bit tempting. Which takes me back to losing it, but less so than before, and, in keeping, while making an abrupt gesture I spill my drink, which is thankfully almost empty. She seems a bit business-like despite being Australian and a traveller. She might not be so easy after all, I start to think before being interrupted in the depth of my thoughts by the bell.

Now that's something different. This is a 25-35 night if I recall. No way this one can be 35. More like late forties, or she's been through some rapid ageing therapy of some kind or other. "I like these parties," she commences, looking haphazardly in the distance, glass in hand. "it's what is cool in London, you can meet all sorts of people, and it's a great melting pot, where I come from, you only met the people from your street, and the boys were terrible, all the same, all about football, you don't like football, do you darling?", I can place a quick "indeed, no" before she continues, "yes, that's what I thought you don't have the hands of a football fan, and still my ex-husband was an Arsenal fan, I know what I'm talking about, terrible, it was a tragedy, and then you know what I was talking to my friend Charlene and she had met that new bloke she was all over, you know what it's like, after a girls night

out, and she doesn't remember anything, only that he had an Arsenal football shirt, so OK, we're there trying", the host rings the bell, "what I was saying yeah trying to find a bloody bloke with an Arsenal shirt in the whole of London, I mean, I told her, forget about the tosser!" Thankfully I can escape as my predecessor starts queueing, "cheers", and move to number 3.

Barely recovered from inebriated late middle age, I settle back in front of a more regular offering. Plain, neither good nor bad, a bit working class perhaps. She works for the NHS, as a nurse. I'm wondering who she's with. I ask and she replies, with some pride in her voice, that she came alone. She congratulates me for same, and I remark that most of the blokes came on their own so it's not that much of an achievement. I almost add that perhaps having friends would be the achievement for us men, but don't as I think the statement might be lost in translation. Moving on to location she's been in London for two weeks, and I can't help wondering if she's just dumped someone (or, somehow less likely been dumped) before she moved and is, double quick, hoping to get quickly sorted, but the bell saves me from even pondering how appropriate it'd be to ask within this setting.

It's getting dizzying, how many left? I think I'm not going to remember any of them. Cleavage, nice, try not to stare. I meet her eyes. She's probably lost already. Another, clean, well to do, plain, not fat but could become so after marriage, and cleavage. She may have taken her widest opening for tonight, and we're at the end of the series which makes it even harder. She looks upset already, and we've just barely exchanged greetings, she should be happy I don't just spend the whole three minutes blindly staring. So we go through the motions of the by now somewhat repetitive pointless factlets conversation, and she seems positively distant. Ah here it is, she tries to pull up her top, that's not gonna work, mate, you need a sweater to fix that. Perhaps there's a type of clothing that has a variable opening depending on the target, so that she could adjust the exposure like the variable-sweep wings of an F14 adapt to flight conditions. I try to look at her or beside her, mildly upset and mildly relaxed at the same time. At least with this one I won't have an arduous decision to make. The bell saves me from the temptation.

"Hello", says the petite Indian girl sitting at the end of the sofa, as if straight out of, or into, some sort of client conference call. I ask what she does: lawyer. I don't ask if she's ambitious, no doubt. She might well end up as a partner in a reasonable law office. There's a feeling I'm being assessed for my career enhancing potential, or as a life accessory. Fairly easy going conversation nonetheless, funny how talking about nothing can vary depending on who you do it with. As I ask her if she's done this before, "once," she replies, almost apologetically, I think that perhaps they should

have a pre-scripted dialogue at these events to make it all easier, and everyone could as well find out who they like by looking between the lines, how people perform rather than what. Another chime, is this treadmill ever going to stop?

Thankfully I see that I'm now going to sit at the last stop before full circle. Relief. My predecessor is telling an apparently passionate story about his last ski holiday to a seemingly interested slim blonde. I wait a bit and then need to sound some "hello, don't want to disturb but..." so that he actually moves. I need a drink, not a girl. I have urges to ask her what she thinks of him but it's so impractical that I ask if she's been living in London for a long time. She's sort of pretty but I'm too jaded to care. And I think she might make a nicer couple with the ski bloke, she looks like she might actually enjoy skiing. Yuck. She's from Toronto and just a condensed summary of half her path to London suitably fills the time allowance. Bell. Last one, what do you do, continue to chat, or hand over. I get up, hesitantly, and ski holiday man is back towards her. He didn't like number 7 obviously.

The host starts explaining that we can 'socialise' from now on, and the petty details of processing our Yes-No-Maybe's onto the website. I look at my card, and notice I've stopped noting down anything at number 14. I try to collect my thoughts. Is there anyone I actually liked? Cold Cleavage is a lost cause but should I 'maybe' her just in case. Will think, or not, later. Circle the number of Petite Brunette, Classic Cutie, Indian Lawyer, why not. As I finish scribbling, next problem, what to do now? Run away? Chase the Australian traveller? I look around. The congenial enough bloke I talked to is at the bar, alone, maybe some male bonding is what's needed now, and as it happens he signs me to join him. We actually exchange the same kind of background details as we did with the girls in the formal part of the gig, but it's less contrived this time. He's called Petro, and the accent, he tells me, is from Milan. He commutes from there to the City job, most weeks for four of five days.

The Antwerp Girl and her friend join us, or more accurately, join him, but eventually I do get to be part of it, all quite relaxed. She enjoyed the night, quite a bit of fun, she says, as I start talking to her Navy girlfriend, who looks altogether more weary. How did these two get to know each other, they're not quite an impossible match, but still a contrasting pair. She says that they were in the same corridor at Uni while Antwerp Girl was doing a year out in Warwick, and then got back in touch on Facebook some years later – they must be 30-ish then – and Antwerp suggested speed dating could be fun. I don't ask weary girl if she found it fun. Petro is certainly having a more voluble discussion with Antwerp, on the merits of the art scene in Antwerp of all things, so I move strategically so that we rejoin before it becomes too

embarrassing alone with Navy girl. I wouldn't mind kissing her this very minute, though she'd call in a destroyer and sink me I'm sure if I even dared to try.

Petro is now monologuing to the girls that he goes Tango dancing and there's an event tonight he goes to frequently and that we could join. The girls conclude that it's late now and that Navy is working tomorrow (I don't ask how, she's being dry docked presumably) and motion to pack and go. Petro gets Antwerp's number and I squeeze my email in on his bit of paper. And tell Navy she can get it from Antwerp's. She acknowledges with professional neutrality.

"So I'm still going to the Tango place, want to come? You'll see it's fun." I hesitate momentarily but well why not. "Can you come as a non-believer?" He dismisses the objection summarily. As we leave I look out at the Australian traveller, who's being worked on by some overweight younger guy, perhaps the most mediocre of all of us. She doesn't seem that interested in him and I consider mentally whether it's worth queueing, but quietly dismiss the idea as too much work, and she may not even be as easy as I think and I don't think I'm in the mood, even at this low level of sobriety, to be able to handle being tossed away by an Aussie strumpet.

As we get out of the bar in the drizzling rain, Petro explains how Tango is great fun and a nice way to meet people though he says he has trouble getting further than the dance partner thing, hence his trying speed dating. He started a year ago, soon after he got the job in London. I ask if the commuting to Milan isn't an unbearable burden, he looks at me, quizzically, I look back, not knowing quite what to think. He pauses a bit, and then, "Well. I haven't told you everything. I'm actually married and have two kids. It's a nightmare. So actually the London job makes it all possible, I couldn't stand it any more to spend the whole time there. When I worked in Milan, it impacted my job too, too stressed to work properly, so I jumped on the occasion when I could get this job here. I mean so yes the weekly flight is a bit of a hassle but you get used to that." Interesting. I'm glad I'm not in such an entanglement. I don't ask why he doesn't just divorce. Well, arguably kids might make it more complicated. Anyway not my business and we move back to how the Tango thing works, he explains there's a class between 7 and 9, I should come once, and then it's free dancing a bit like a club so no problem with me joining even if I don't dance.

We enter a mid-size almost deserted standard-slick cocktail bar; "it's downstairs", Petro says, and we go down a staircase at the back, pay a fiver to a suitably Argentinian-looking man in his fifties at the desk, complete with melancholic expression and hat, and get in.

Petro chats briefly with another South American type middle aged woman, short, petite, sporty, a bit too old for my fancy but well kept. She's the one who runs the class. He says he knows a couple of people, "oh, Marissa is free, pardon me", and he goes to ask her out while I settle at the bar. It's actually a pleasant atmosphere, less obviously tense than the speed dating, and the crowd is a mix from thirties to middle aged, maybe I should indeed try but as I watch the intricate steps and procedure, I can't help thinking I'd be totally useless at that sort of exercise.

After a couple of dances Petro comes back with an early thirties woman he introduces as Helena. Dark mid-length curly hair, too tight skirt, not the most flattering figure or looks, she discusses some technicalities of tango before he leaves for the next dance, I'm left chatting with Helena, who's Greek, the conversation goes round briefly her path to London and extinguishes itself quietly into a lament on the London weather.

As Petro comes back from his last round on the dance floor, the Greek girl has been rejoined by a mate, of similar build, with whom she leaves promptly. "I think I'm done for tonight" says Petro, looking weary. We keep on watching and chatting for a while, and, before parting, he leaves me his business card.

As I walk back towards the tube station in the continuing rain, I reflect that after all speed dating may be more suitable to find mates than girlfriends. It could be worse. And maybe I'll get plenty of admirers tomorrow when I check the website.

Tracksuit blues

It's ten past eight when I arrive at the Haberdasher's Head, the pub in Camden Town where we're meeting before a gig. I'm late, as usual. Henry has already secured a pint, as usual. I've convinced him to come to see that German industrial band, but not sure he'll enjoy it. I'm still upset about some nothingness from work, some paper pusher causing trouble with expenses. I repeat my complaint to Henry who listens with more care than the story deserves and contributes his own story, and I end up reassured it happens to others as well. "It's annoying that I can get so upset by such a triviality", I say. "That's the story of our species, I bet the Palestine mess started with some travel expense story, and they're still going thousands of years later, and will probably keep on for the next few thousand years", he replies in a deafening storm of wisdom.

I keep checking my phone for time, fearing to miss the start of the gig, though we've settled for 9pm and there's some time. "It's a bit young round here", ponders Henry as he observes the crowd. "And a bit white", I add, indie middle class kids tend to stay within the family. The atmosphere is thick with youth's confident uncertainty. "Makes you glad not to be that age any longer, doesn't it?", he comments. "You're too wise tonight, man, I'm going to feel inadequate soon," I reply, amused. He smiles back. I check my phone for time, again. "I'm wise and in that capacity I tell you we're not late", he tries.

We've moved out of that dreadful pub and are now reaching the venue. Old converted theatre, magnificent façade, despite the inevitably garish event displays. No queue. "We actually may be late", I say. We get past security after a most cursory body check. It's crowded. I need a drink. Henry remarks we've just rushed down our second pint and declines, so I get one for myself. We stand at the back of the pit, below the fine plasterwork-ornamented balconies. We're just in front of the mixing desk and still the sound is crap, I remark to Henry, who nods absent-mindedly. "Do you fancy going a bit more in front?", he answers it's a bit too packed for that.

I eventually leave Henry by the mixing desk and move in front. The sound gets worse. The band are trying, it's indeed packed, but still. A guy on my left steps on me. I move sideways a bit. The music is the band I know but I'm not

sure the soul is there. I start hoping it's going to come or it's just me not being in the right mood. I've just finished my beer, and I move back to the bar for another one.

At the bar as I wait for my beer, a young girl pops up on my right. Skinny, bit shorter than me, open shirt on some flatness. I'm not in a state to be able to find her attractive or not. "Where you at the gig in Amsterdam?" she asks. "No, I wasn't", I reply and she says she thought she recognised me and chats a bit about how good it was and we exchange some chit chat about the band. I wonder if she's flirting, as a bearded youth with the look of someone who likes Pringles a lot, wearing an inappropriately chequered shirt, interrupts with a "Should we move back to the floor?" She nods at him, gets closer to me and murmurs "I work at the National Gallery, find me there", soon to disappear with the chequered shirt. As I pick my beer I realise one of my favourite tracks is ending. Socialising is bad for art.

Back in the crowd I'm getting a bit more pissed but the sound hasn't improved. I keep listening in tense discomfort, just remaining lucid enough to wonder if I'm trying too hard to have fun and that it isn't going to work. The tracks go past, the performers are seemingly having some fun on their side, or at least more than I'm having. It's soon over. I go and grab another beer before the encore and reposition myself in the packed crowd. It's me stepping over someone, "sorry", I'm getting proper tipsy. I've drunk too much, I think, looking at my half empty plastic glass. Well, I'm still standing.

The encore is over and they've now switched on the bright exit lights and the crew is packing, as I rejoin Henry who's still by the mixing desk. "I've rarely seen you walk so indecisively" he says, amused. "Yes I'm defo drunker than you today," I say. He declares that he enjoyed the gig, for something that's not his usual cup of tea, and I ask "yeah... crap sound! pfff...", I mutter as my ability to form structured sentences becomes a distant acquaintance. I want to tell him about the National Gallery girl but the room starts becoming a bit too wobbly so I look for a wall to lean on. "You're OK?" asks Henry, but as I finish the last of my glass and let it drop, the room stops and I reply "A bit tipsy, but it'll be fine." Maybe we should get out?

We walk towards the tube stop with a dense crowd from the gig. The fresh night time air rekindles me a bit, to the point of being angsty. "We should get one more drink?", perhaps. "Maybe you need a lemonade." He's right of course but I grumble, upset, "I need to tell you National Gallery thing" I say, "if you insist I'm OK with a drink", he says, accommodatingly.

We stop, a few yards in front of the entrance of the tube station, "so where go we?" I ask. And I look round. A human form, fuzzy but clearly female, is

saying goodbye on the side of the pavement to her mate, who swiftly disappears in the entrails of a London black cab. As she turns, looks around, and hesitates a bit, as she surely looks for the tube station, I move and ask her, "Want to come for a drink with us?", expecting her to run away as if I was an inopportune wino, which I sort of am at this very moment. She looks at me, from head to toe, briefly looks at Henry, and then looks back at me, pensively for a long couple of seconds, and then replies "Maybe, where are you going?" I turn back to Henry, as he looks over, surprised, and ask him "Where are we going?" He replies that there's a place down the street he knows that might be open. She looks back at him; intently, and asks: "Henry?"

I move back a step and hang onto the railings, after all I'm not in a state to stand for a long time vertically. They start talking. And moving round with the whole scenery.

They must have chatted for a while as Henry signals me to follow towards said pub. I follow a couple of steps behind as they talk to each other. "Hey what the fuck", I think to myself. She's an ex of his or something. My head hurts. I concentrate on following, not losing them and not falling on my face. I'm cold now.

We enter a pub. Half busy. I order a lemonade this time. Henry must be right. They sit at a table and I finally settle in a chair, I've rarely been so glad to meet a chair. I look blankly at them. "This is Rachel," Henry says, "you guys know each other?" I interrupt, and he continues, "well, yes and no, we talked online last year and we hadn't come round to meeting, actually you stopped replying to me," he adds looking back at her, "but she remembered enough of my photos to recognise me tonight." She looks back towards me and asks what I do, "I'm a drunk", I say, as my survival instinct digs deep into the emergency sense of humour circuit, staring carelessly at delightful bulges hiding under her shirt.

They start talking about a band that I don't know of, and seem pretty excited about it. I slump further in my chair, just looking at them, it's cute. He's onto a winner, I think. I would do her as well, really. Not that I'm in a state. The discussion is too intricate for me to register, "bassist" ... "In the depth of a well" ... "gorgeous" ... whatever.

Lights come on. Fucking London another pub closing stupidly early. We have to move on. I follow, valiantly as the ever resourceful Henry directs us to a new place a bit further down the High Street. It's uglier than the previous one but it's open. Slightly busier but not 'busy' busy. We settle down. Henry is at the bar. I slump in a new chair. "Funny night, eh?" I tell Rachel. As she starts

a reply, “Do you guys like funky house?” interrupts a hoodie, probably drunker than me.

Rachel replies politely she's more into singer songwriters and he then says that a cool girl like her can only have awesome taste, and then launches into a full blown flirt-cum-monologue as I observe. I'm feeling uneasy – will we ever get rid of him? Hope Henry comes back. I just slump further in my seat hoping Rachel is as streetwise as she seems, in so far as I can hope anything at this stage. He's getting a bit agitated as I observe the refinement of his tracksuit, orange with mauve strips, matched with a particularly garish pair of green Nike trainers.

Our saviour, Henry, is back from the bar with the drinks. Hoodie stops briefly, “and, do you like funky house, mate?”, which gets a stern response from the least funky-housed man in London, but then Rachel contributes that she can like it on some days and so hoodie is back into monologue flirt, clearly hoping to score. Henry contributes a few yeahs and then is becoming upset. Rachel starts, at last, trying to dismiss Hoodie with a frosty “It was nice to meet you.” Thank God his phone rings and Henry and Rachel start having a fast paced conversation on the use of the double negative, which is enough, combined with the sucking force of his next appointment, to get rid of Hoodie.

I moan, “I thought we'd never get rid of him.” Rachel says “He was not unentertaining” to which Henry retorts, “A tosser in green trainers can only be entertaining at his own expense.” Getting a bit more relaxed now, the worst of the booze is starting to be digested. Beery headache is coming on. Bit early to start the hangover phase. I sigh. I need a pee. Depart, find the location, broken tiles, stinky floor. Do the deed, most of it on target. Look at myself in the mirror above the sink. I still look quite presentable. Good drunk. I should think to go home and leave the two together. As I come back, they look uncharacteristically restrained for that time of the night, sitting at the edge of the bench. Please, be my guest. I slump back a bit as they restart chatting about something that has become irrelevant compared to my pressing headache.

“You'll be all right?” asks Henry after I've announced I'm departing. “Yeah yeah I've just got a headache, good sign”, I say, “have fun, cheers”, I finish, and move towards the toilet. Oops wrong way “cheers” as I pass them again, and leave into the frosty night.

As I sit upstairs on the front seat on a night bus, I stare dumbly into the London night. The town is dead. A few cars, fewer pedestrians, as I think that I've not even talked about my speed dating, that Petro guy, etc, to Henry.

Been in a funny mood. And that Rachel UFO, where did that come from? Would be funny if those two got hooked together. I quite liked her, too. At least there was no ambiguity that she was more into Henry than me. My head hurts. The bus bumps. Some loud hipsters are moving up the staircase and thankfully sit down far away at the back. I pat myself on the back for negotiating the stairs without incident. The journey passes quickly I'm almost tempted to stay on observing the night town from above in this comfy seat, especially now the hipsters have left, but do go down as my stop is in view. I walk in an almost straight line to my abode; on auto pilot, door, lift, door, bed. I lay on the bed, everything turns. I feel sick.

Online treadmill

I'm back on the online treadmill. Checking my speed dating matches for the third day in a row. Got one 'maybe' yesterday and that's all. Success. The boring Indian lawyer. I sent her a "let's meet up" and no reply yet and I feel I'm probably going to be dispatched to the Great Dating Void. It may be wiser to just skip that and spare the passive rejection stage, it's essentially harmless but it still hurts in a very tiny little way, and no need for even homeopathic pain when it's so pointless. If she answered I'd get bored and then I'd have to inflict homeopathic pain on her too. Time to get more selective, I think.

I wonder how Henry finished it off with that Rachel girl. I text him for an evening beer. Sunday is so boring. It's a quintessential London grey outside. But it's dry, small victory! Time for a walk round the City, maybe I could get some art and boobs at Tate Modern. I like art galleries, always a good supply of arty girls that can be enjoyed within a corner of one's field of vision next to some more intellectual eye candy; even the middle aged, or worse, can be finely elegant often with a faint hint of despair giving a perfect highlight to their character. If it were not for the tick-list tourists enjoying the London free ride it'd be perfect, though even those can be entertaining, there's always some bit of joy to be gained from looking at teenagers ashamed of their parents who themselves seem to subconsciously wish they could be ashamed and discard their offspring. I check my online sites once more before I go.

Hm, this profile looks vaguely interesting. She likes the cinema, and all the usual crap. Funny picture though. Only face, and only half a face. Another case of Internet Angle? Sometimes a face-only picture can hide a large arse that could get fatally stuck in an economy airline seat, or some otherwise not so alluring forms. So you learn to infer the size of the girl from the neck or facial features. This one doesn't look bad from that, but the truncated face is strange. Anyway, she's interested in DIY and Woody Allen so I fire an 'Allen-key' line that has unusually effortlessly come to my mind. We'll see.

I have to reply to yesterday's email from Elisa. She wants us to go to Punishment Park, the famed fetish night. I've never been, great to have someone to go with for such advanced entertainment. She says she planned to go with a couple she'd played with before, leaving the semantics of 'play' precisely uncertain, but they've got a cold. As it happens, I've got an as yet

unused PVC shirt I had bought just in case I were to get into advanced entertainment, in or out of the house. Surely I can make an outfit around that. Henry has suggested some pinstripe trousers. Off to Ebay for second hand pinstripe trousers in vaguely my size. 150 matches, god, it's as much work as dating. After shuffling around, and an hour lost to browsing vintage oscilloscopes, misdirected by a vendor of steampunk attire that also had some pinstriped stock. I don't actually need an oscilloscope, I vanquish the urge for consumerism, and move back onto the straight pinstripe, and find something suitable. Will it come with fleas, I ponder, as I place a bid. I mull over what this notorious PP thing is going to be like. I've been told you shouldn't expect to get laid. Google it a bit, read some random forum threads. A girl is outraged that her boyfriend of oh so many years cheated on her with someone met at PP. Well isn't that the whole point? Surely one shouldn't attend a sex club and be surprised one's mates are using it for some hanky panky on occasion. It's starting to look like it might be a very mild form of amusement after all. Reply OK to Elisa but that she has to explain how it works and do outfit counselling.

Henry texts back that he's in Devon. The gossiping will have to be postponed. Fuck it's 4pm now and I've still not been out. I dress, but remain unwashed, for my Tate fix. Will I become a stinky piece of art?

It's now raining again, sigh. I walk through the empty street, the Sunday tourists at St Paul's, and off through the Millennium Bridge, it's a rather thin crowd at this time of day. Taking pictures, a couple walks past, normal bloke late 20s, fat and rather ugly girl, similar age or a bit more. I think he could have done better. I reflect it's reassuring to notice those rather than get frustrated by the opposite situation. The opposite situation quickly walks past, almost model like slim girl, blonde, a bit high street looks but human enough to be more desirable than an actual model, at the hand of some indefinitely shaped guy with a short neck and a bent nose, looking distinctly uninteresting to boot, but who knows, he might be the best comedian in London. Still, how did he do it? I turn as they pass, the back of his jacket does not say "pick up one like this, 0800 etc."

Less than one hour before closing. Not too many people in Tate Modern. I get to the second floor and spend some time looking at a row of photos of ordinary people in a stern pose, from interwar Germany, and become engrossed enough to forget I came to do chick spotting. I move on, to the more familiar permanent exhibition room next door, there's a pretty decent silhouette next to the blue Picasso, but I've lost the enthusiasm now, it's like a wank gone wrong through some interruption, when you want to finish but can't. "Sir, we're closing in ten minutes," says a burly middle aged schoolmistress type in a Tate uniform which is far more elegant than she'll

ever be.

I walk back via now-deserted City backstreets. Near the Old Bailey a woman, skinny, elegant from what I can sense from a quick glance, is sobbing quietly in a doorway. After I've walked past, I wonder if I should have sat down and offered to swap sad stories to cheer each other up. Maybe she didn't need a stalker on top of whatever else she was going through, and I never have such ideas quick enough for reality. Closer to home, the resident lost veteran is sitting quietly, contentedly, in a doorway next to the greasy spoon opposite the late awakening meat market, his red beret in hand. The shop is brightly empty, apart from the staff; like his mind, it seems.

I close the door, it's home. I sit down and check email. No email. Nobody loves me, despite my having been out for a good two hours! But I don't sob, either, or ever.

Gutter slip

From the online photos, I couldn't make up my mind whether she's attractive or not, though at least she was shapely enough. Taller version of petite if I might say so, on the me-and-my-bicycle full body one, one potential dark cloud out of the way. I arrive late at the pub. Somewhat hipstery place, DIY furniture, LP covers on the wall behind the bar, music paraphernalia. Regular furnishings, not the expected vintage. Green chairs, dark yellow formica-style tables. I think I can see her. Some guy of a similar age sits at her side chatting with her. Who is he? Is she the wrong one? The haircut is unmistakable though, even in a hipster place. She sees me and signals me to come, the other guy stops talking and switches to talking to some other people on his other side.

I sit down. She doesn't explain the bloke, some friends perhaps? Odd. Anyway proceedings start as usual. Finding the place wasn't too difficult. She likes the bar. As I watch her I still can't come to a conclusion on her attractiveness or lack thereof, it's bizarre. Kissable, definitely. I order a glass of wine. Feel dating tension, it's always a bit uncomfortable at the beginning, but we relax quickly. "I can't exactly pinpoint the accent, where is it from?", I ask. She was born in Romania but her parents fled to Germany, they're part of the German speaking minority there, when she was two years old, been in London since after Uni. As I inevitably slide towards the career question, she seems a bit reluctant, in a determined way. "Guess what I do?" she asks. "Is it glamorous?" I ask. "Not as such", she replies. Embarrassing job, let's think, she's improbable as a call girl, not slick enough, could probably do looks-wise though she's still in this no-man's-land of attractiveness, which keeps intriguing me. Celebrity model is certainly not it, that's one sure thing. Porn actress, neither, she's too sophisticated and literate, it's a working class job I gather, and she'd be a bit old to still be in it. "Do you work for MI5 then? But that can't be it, you'd have to kill me after you tell me if that was." She smiles, "try again!" "Hm," I hesitate, "maybe HM Revenue then?" She's enjoying this. Wrong answer. Mental health, perhaps I think, though that's not particularly problematic, is it? "Psychiatrist?" I attempt. "Not quite, but almost there, you're doing well" she replies. "Uh, I don't know then, psychologist, psychoanalyst, but don't you need to be a psychiatry graduate to do that?" That's it, she confirms, "I'm a psychoanalyst", and explains

further that actually no, psychoanalysts have a different training than psychiatrists and are not medical doctors. She's done a renowned London Freudian school, and is almost done with her Ph.D. She currently works in the NHS in an institution for dependent old people.

That doesn't seem too worrying really. She seems reasonably sane, on par with non-psychiatrists even I'd say, from first impressions, which can be misleading. I learn a bit more about Freudian shrink training and then we move on to discuss music. We've got some bands we like in common which she finds uncannily exciting. The conversation continues agreeably and I relax with the second glass of wine and she progressively appears more and more kissable. "But I can't stand it when the lyrics go on too much about naff love" she says. I concur, "it's as if Rock'n Roll contributes to maintain the little princess fairy tale stories, though perhaps we're all looking for our little prince, or princess." "And there's a lot of unrequited love in these stories, often, I don't think unrequited love is truly love" she says. "Well that's a can of worms – what is requited love then? Imagine someone sleeps with someone else but one party just goes on in a casual way, good shag kind of thing, without getting materially involved emotionally, then I think it's still a fair argument to say it's unrequited even if there is consummation and the one who is really into it doesn't get the target's lack of interest", I spurt. "Hm, yes, you have a point, although I rather think you usually know, perhaps 'unrequited' is a different form, or on a scale on a continuum", she replies. "Yes, fuzziness always has a place in any good argument," I add. "But you could argue that it's not love if someone just sees their own viewpoint, it's narcissism," she suggests. I reply, "yes, love is always narcissism, to some degree, perhaps essentially narcissism, it's an unsolvable paradox: if it was altruistic, then you wouldn't ever experience jealousy: if your loved one finds happiness or fun elsewhere, you should rejoice and be happy for them. In practice one gets a bit miffed when one's partner is having fun elsewhere, and it's a deep instinct, so there must always be a component of self reflection in any feeling of love." She needs to go to the toilet, on cue.

The bar is almost full by now. Nice crowd, bit younger than us but actually I like her enough that there's no one in my field of vision I'm more interested in at this very moment. Bliss. She comes back and sits down, we descend back into some innocent tangent about the light fittings, some appropriately Italian plastic sixties globes, in gradients of translucent red, green, and yellow. She's sitting close enough for me to make an attempt. I look at her, intently, then look back at the light fittings, push an hesitating, "yes, the colours fit well together", look back, move a bit, hesitate, look back at the light fitting, think the opportunity window is going to close soon, and look back to her, it's as if she's reading my mind I'm sure. I move, finally. As our lips touch I believe she has indeed read my mind. It was a great kiss, long,

deep, connective, one of those where you forget where you are, for an instant. As we stand back she smiles, radiantly, "You're quite forward but I like that" she says. "Well we have known each other for more than two hours," I reply, thinking this might be amusing and she seems to even buy that argument.

We go on another sweet round. We pause to look at each other silently for a moment. "You guys are having great fun, aren't you?", says the long forgotten guy she was talking to when I arrived. He is still sitting to my right with his friends further away, talking loudly on matters of great insignificance. As he continues ranting I get tense and stressed, how the hell are we going to get rid of him? I get closer to her and put my arm around her shoulder, saying in a louder voice than usual, "now that's difficult", so far she's only nodded very vaguely at him, and she whispers to me "he just wants to be included" and pauses, while I kiss her neck. He looks back to his friends, and then back to us, and says "My friend Dave is a true Londoner, he knows all and everything about this city," and then she murmurs, much more in control than I am: "Just politely put him in his place. Be a man." Well, good to have a mental health professional when you get care in the community in your face. I summon all the courage I don't have, and tell him, "Yes London is very nice, it was nice to talk to you but I think Dave is missing you." I then move away my glass, turn decidedly and go back to fondling my date. I expect to sink further in embarrassment and endless trouble, but, as she had predicted, a little bit of affirmation worked out. He even moves physically towards his friends and turns his back on us.

Well, this worked out so far but I'm still under the adrenaline or whatever and after a further few minutes of quiet awkwardness I suggest we leave or at least get outside. She nods. The pavement is busy with smokers and it's actually quite pleasant in the fresh air, not raining, and clement enough to sit. She sits down in the gutter between two parked cars. I'm puzzled, briefly. I sit next to her. We kiss again. I like her, I still don't know if I fancy her but I like her. The tension has almost evaporated by now and I remark "pretty innovative position to watch the world go by", she agrees, "yes, you're hidden, almost invisible, and at crotch level." as hip crotches do indeed go past. "It must be even better in summer when the ladies are a bit less dressed up", I don't go further into the potential a proper upskirt geek could take of the situation. Not as good as staircases though for that I guess.

"It's getting late, my bike is just there." We get up and I walk with her to her bike. "Nice one, just the right mix between trendy but old enough not to be a bike thief magnet, you're one clever girl", she kisses me softly, briefly. I hazard, "We could have another drink", but she replies "I've drunk enough for tonight and got some shopping to do tomorrow", seems a weak excuse,

it's not a weekday, but well. We kiss one last time, she mounts her bike and disappears away as the street turns, unromantically close as it is.

At the church

It's Punishment Park day. Elisa has just arrived at mine and is all excited about the night. "Look, I made a hat!" she says, showing a miniature paper hat made of porn magazines. As I look closer I wonder and ask "Do you actually have porn magazines in this day and age?" She replies, "no, I had to print them out from the Internet, and made a collage with bits from a sex toys catalogue." I've settled for the pin stripe trousers to go with the PVC shirt, black police-like hiking shoes, modded with red shoelaces that I've bought in extremis this afternoon. She approves, "yes, that'll do, it's actually not that anal I think, as long as you've made some effort, you get in." Her outfit is actually simpler, goth boots, strap-on dildo, a bit of glitter make up, as highlight, on her compact but refined breasts and that's it. "There are usually changing rooms of some kind near the cloakroom", she says, I stand reassured she won't be travelling in the tube naked with a strap-on as sole clothing. Boots go into a bag as well. She's putting the last touch to the breast make up, "Not even an excuse for a bra, one of those stick up stars or something?" I query. "Don't really need a bra," indeed her breasts are as beautifully shaped as they are economic on material. God must have been in a good mood but had run out of plasticine on the day he created her, "and my nipples are not compatible with glue-on stars, moreover that would clearly be too much clothing" she adds. "What do you think of my ears?" she adds, adjusting her cat ears. "Meow!" I reply, "but are you sure the cock hat is fitting with your feline character?", she puts it on. This is unassailable. "OK, you win."

"Do you know the venue?", she asks. "Not really, but I've googled it up, as you surely expected, and it's a disused church; well, actually, it's probably seeing more useful kind of use than when it was consecrated for use by some Christian cult or other." She remarks, "Yeah yeah I know you're anti-clerical, but that sounds exciting nonetheless."

We're in the tube to Brixton, perfectly packed, no free seat left but no unpleasant squeeze of standing passengers either. Saturday night crowd, the usual mix of tourists, the middle class coming back from dinner or a higher form of culture, a couple is sitting diagonally away from me near the door, tweed jacket for Mr, prominent teeth on an otherwise barely faded prettiness

for Mrs, who might have been a fair catch in her day, and who seem content both with their evening and each other. Positively so by the standard of London underground attitude. It may just be a bit of alcohol. "You've got a cock on your purse!", says an American female voice, suddenly, taking me away from my sociological reveries. She's sitting opposite Elisa. She points at her hat, which she holds in her hands. Elisa replies, "This is not a purse, it's a hat!" and continues, explaining how she manufactured it herself and for what purpose she's been so enterprising. American Girl, late 20s probably, light-boring green top, anonymous tight jeans, not quite Ivy League but almost – would do – giggles and is amused, she has "never seen that before, you know, I'm from Kansas."

Having played our part for the promotion of London as a trendy tourist destination, we alight at our destination. How is it really going to be, I think, a bit queasy. Will we, or I at least, get past the bouncer? On the escalator, a group are obviously going to the same place as we are. An apparently sophisticated outfit can be guessed from hints emerging at the edges of a long leather trench coat. He has devilish horns affixed to his shaved head, very well done, one could well believe they are a permanent fixture. As he turns looking at an advert, one can see half the face decorated in dark green make up, the whole set reminds me of Gandalf from Grendizer. I remark to Elisa that maybe her cat ears are not quite as impressive as this guy's horns. She smirks.

Finding the building is not difficult, it stands at a triangular crossing, certain of itself, despite its heavy silhouette, lacking in elegance; it's not a Wren church. Finding the entrance is even easier, following the steady stream of shady characters with hats or bits of PVC showing off under their street clothing. We're quite early but there's already a queue. It's sold out apparently, as a tall thin plastic fur coat with a sparkly hat goes up the queue asking if anyone has a ticket to sell.

As we arrive at the door, the staff is looking surprisingly intellectual, or perhaps not so surprisingly. The bouncer, late thirties, associate lecturer appearance, maybe it's his day job, waves Elisa through as she opens her bags showing her kit. He looks at my shoes, which are apparently not enough, and I open my coat and show enough PVC to be let in. In front of the cashier, there's a middle aged guy with a standard-cute trophy wife type who's looking pretty much like my Spanish work colleague Rodrigo, from the compliance department. I don't even know Rodrigo much, so I've a moment of hesitation wondering if it's him or not. On balance I think it's not. It could have been interesting, especially coming from compliance.

There's also a queue for the cloakroom, along a busy spiral staircase. A bit

too much light for my taste, though good point to observe the outfits of fellow revellers. On the way up people are still hiding inside their jackets, while downwards they come fully kitted. A man, forty something, stocky, in a shiny lilac latex outfit, top and trousers, is spraying a similarly attired mate in brown and orange – not sure about those colours – with some slippery compound. Elisa explains that if two people in latex or PVC rub against each other, it can grip and cause the expensive outfit to tear apart, hence the need for lubrication. “Which perhaps some might want, improvised striptease?”, I suggest, worrying that I have to take some care not to end the night with a torn shirt, this bloody PVC shirt is after all more expensive than a regular fabric shirt! Down comes a half naked man, leather cargo pants, some almost non existing top made of netting, and plenty of metal and leather fetish accessories on his arms. And behind a suitably matched girl, with a PVC corset, not quite fitting, she's not big but it's one size off I think. High heels she's having some trouble mastering, but overall the style is an agreeable mix of faux trash and dorky.

Elisa has now shed most of her clothes and we're going down the spiral the other way. “Do you think they actually go out of their way to heat the place to make it comfy to be naked or is it just natural”, I ask. “It's been known to not work out; in the middle of Winter last year I was at that studenty fetish party in East London and I had to borrow a top...” she replies. I think she's getting some more attention than I am though it's all subtle, somehow nobody is obviously staring at anyone else despite the freak show. We're down to the main level, there's two large dance floors either side, in the upper part of the apse of the church, which has been sliced horizontally and vertically with concrete floors and walls – in cross shape maybe? Still nicely spacious, the first room we get to has a stage at the bottom, red, white, black flag-like with PP's logo; kindergarten provocation, and as it happens there's an admiral type, or is it an air force officer's uniform, in light blue with many stars on his epaulettes and gilded ornament hanging here and there. Gaddafi, the poster child of cheap DIY-style uniform costumes, would probably like it here. The drinks are a couple of pounds dearer than in standard London underground clubs, it's not quite the soup kitchen despite the Hell's Kitchen styling. As I find Elisa after having heroically kept most of the precious liquids inside the glasses despite the rough ride through the packed crowd, I ponder “what do you think all these people do during the week, it's not quite affordable for proper bohemians, is it?” She smiles, “Well, my mate Stuart is a partner at Deloitte. Not seen him tonight, it could be a bit odd actually we haven't spoken for ages.” She further explains that she got an involvement with Stuart, she visited his private dungeon several times, “We got into that routine, the deal was play, I mean he's a cool guy but not a date, we'd meet like once every couple of months, but then he got a bit funny, like sending romantic texts and then denying the next day, and it got heavy the next time

we met, so we needed to talk, and we decided to stop the play.” she says. “But are you on good terms?”, I ask; “Yes, well that's what I think, aside from the odd episode he was normal, and when we chatted he said he respected my decision, we had tea and stuff. But then when I just wrote for news a couple of weeks later he didn't reply.” I remark, after a pause, that maybe she broke his heart, even if he didn't quite express it. She notes “Well, that wasn't the deal, but for all I know it could have been, in a sickly repressed way. Anyway, you see, it might be a bit odd if I bump into him.” I reply that it's a big place, with lots of wiggle room. The light changes at that moment and someone comes on stage to announce the beginning of a performance. There are several short performances, according to some photocopied running order glued to the wall, that I had noticed earlier. Fetish-themed dance shows or fairground freak show, from the look of it.

The show is indeed within the scope of what I expected, a leather and chains themed version of French cancan, with a sweet amateur touch. It's not a big budget production and it has just six girls and an executioner type faffing around with a leather cagoule and with, leather as well, trousers holed up to show his groin, his shaved balls collared at the base with a metal ring from which emerges a not-really-erect, but not-quite-absent-either, dick – that must be the hard part to master – which he's waving gleefully around as he makes his moves around the girls popping their legs up and down. Jolly.

After the performance, the music returns, a mix of old school club hits, hard house perhaps, a bit too lacking in character for my taste, but not altogether unpleasant. “We haven't seen the other room”, exclaims Elisa. We move on, walk past two fairly large girls in matching corsets lacking, perhaps, in grace. A sixty year old tall and skinny guy, bald with some remnant of white hair, copious white chest hair, in a fluorescent yellow ballet tutu, and fluorescent pink lipstick follows. OK, lots of creativity in these parts, one thing that is sure here is that it's virtually impossible to come in even the most ridiculous outfit and not be out-ridiculed by someone else. I tell Elisa that the fat-friendliness here, however unsightly, is relaxing compared to the slick mainstream youth clubs of the Westend. “Or East End!”, she corrects.

Past the spiral hallway and through the crowd, we reach the other room, which feels bigger as the dance floor is recessed, a semi-circular pit with stairs down on each side. The DJ booth towers above this pit, through a window with a classic headpiece; he is almost like the pope at St Peters' window. He might not approve of this decadent setting, though to be honest apart from the costumes, a bit of nudity and the odd show of genitalia, it's really mainly a dance club, so far. A late thirties girl DJ, who looks a bit used up, and fittingly dikey, plays a fairly pleasant blend of hardtech, slightly used up too, but all for the best. The dance floor is half full, after all it's still a bit

early, Elisa and I go down to help fill it.

Later, having lost track of time, we take a break. We settle behind the railings towering above the dance floor, good place to do crowd spotting. “Look!”, says Elisa, nodding towards the bar, where a pair of crash test dummies have appeared. They show no skin whatsoever, just a tight fitting one piece bodysuit, complete with the circular crossed position signs on the side of the head, like the real thing. It must be the best outfit of the night. On the other side, one corner of the room is fenced with fabric, with a sign saying ‘Couples’ Room’, which Elisa explains that you can go to for action with a pre-arranged mate, which you may have found 2 minutes earlier elsewhere in the club, indeed apparently nobody does much on the dance floor here and the couple's room is supervised by volunteer club stewards. All very organised. So I guess I'm off that, not sure about performing sex in public myself really, actually performing even dressed up doesn't appeal, but I remark that for the most decadent place in London it's fairly sedate. “There's more action in the dungeon downstairs”, she says, “we should go and have a tour, you have to see it.”

We go down through another staircase, to a suitably vaulted and intricate couple of rooms, more intimate than the main rooms, if still large; an underground that is still no lower than street level, I guess from an emergency exit door. First there's just a bar, that looks much like upstairs, on the side there's a room with some large contraptions onto which people can be bound and ‘tortured’. A couple of them are in use: some sort of slightly leaning crucifix on which a slim girl in a pink PVC bodysuit is bound. A leathered-up playmate is whipping her, very slowly. It looks exceedingly gentle, more theatre than inflicting pain, and even then not particularly convincing theatre. If pain is pleasure she's not going to get pleasure that way. A second couple has the boy bound to some sort of vertical grill that is being turned by his female playmate, a rather large, short one, with another corset – which is fitting this time, but she's still not the prettiest thing around. She looks suitably dominatrix though, like a Victorian stern school headmistress, she is torturing him with a sort of hammer like implement with a large ball of red rubber at the business end.

In the second room, the entrails of the dungeon, at last some people are on sofas, kissing or playing with each other. In the distance, an actual fuck, I see the back of the girl riding, in cowgirl position, on top of her middle aged partner, who's sitting on a sofa. Middle build, grey hair, including on head, pretty normal bloke. He seems to be thinking of something else. My gaze briefly crosses his, feels like someone you might look at on the tube, it's odd. Then his cock is going inside and out, at a middling rhythm. Not embarrassing, quite, indeed it could be said that they're those most in their

role in this room, but not erotic either. We move on towards the bar and grab a drink. Looking for a sofa we walk past a coffin with holes on the sides, for hands to touch the inside. The steward tries to convince Elisa to try it. The deal is that once you've settled in the box you get gropped by strangers, who put their hands through the holes. It has some sort of lid that shows off little bits of the inmate, enough to see it's currently being occupied by a young man, probably in his twenties as much as one can judge from the visible body parts. Yeah. Mildly amusing. I'll pass, I could see a use for boob play though I'd really want to know the owner of the equipment I play with, not sure I'd dare anyway and I don't think there's a free boob stand. It would be too popular, perhaps. We settle down in a sofa nearby, as two people leave, sitting space is a bit in short supply here. I avoid thinking about what residue I may be sitting on. I remark to Elisa that the fucking couple wasn't that erotic, "Yes, it's more like Richard Attenborough." I concur, "besides, we're over saturated with well lit porn with well groomed actors nowadays, mere reality as a spectator sport is not so exciting. I guess seeing a murder would be quite disappointing as well, some scuffle, one person takes out gun, bang, the other guy collapses, over in 5 seconds." She nods, while staring at some other couple kissing in the corner, "I wouldn't mind playing with these, the two of them, cute girl isn't she?" Not sure, the girl is OK, tall skinny shape, bit lacking in posture, and not unpleasant but plain face. "Hm, yeah, but I'm not quite star struck", I say.

"I want to dance", says Elisa, and we move back upstairs to the dance floors, passing through the busy staircases, crossing a boiler hat, a hard hat, and a mitre on the way up. I've settled on the side of the dance floor while Elisa, really hyperactive tonight, is talking to a tall skinny girl, in a simple glittery evening dress, her features are not so remarkable. As I stare at her, I realise she looks vaguely familiar. Maybe I've seen her profile on a dating site. I'll have to check when back home.

I dance a bit more in between a half-naked, surely gay, bodybuilder and a couple in matching nurse and doctor PVC outfits. As I look back at Elisa, after a while of losing myself in the music and fauna, she's kissing the girl who looks like I know her from a dating profile, quick pecking, no more. The other girl might be a bit shy. I continue dancing and later Elisa appears from behind me, "This is Jana, we're going for a drink, do you want to come or stay here?", which I understand after she repeats it a second time. I opt for keeping to the boogie.

A good hour later, I wonder what she's been up to, she hasn't reappeared yet, but scanning the room I see she's by the entrance of this floor. I move towards her. As I get close I see a security guard, typical of the profession, a well built, muscular black guy who exercises a lot, in white t-shirt and black

jeans, with an earpiece and a staff badge. He's near a corner at a strategic location, looking over one of the main intersections in the club, opposite there's Elisa talking to Jana and a mate of hers. I'm still a distance away. The security guy has apparently forgotten his duty and just stares intently at Elisa's beautiful body, still in her strap-on, shoes and little else. This lasts a while, as I just watch the scene myself from outside the frame, amused. Elisa seems completely unaware of the power of the lust particles hitting her with great intensity, she's like a mountain unaware of neutrinos passing through her. Moments later, she's become aware I'm here, and I join her. "Jana's from Prague!", she says. The security guy is gone next time I look in his direction.

Jana from Prague disappears shortly after, and we go back to the floor with a stage, to see if there's a show on. The only show at this time is on the dance floor itself, where an uncannily tall tranny, in a long pink dress, fabric this time, with a giant shiny silver ribbon tied on her back, wrapped like a sweet, perambulates slowly. The music is now sounding like disco classics. Copious amounts of smoke add efficacious shadows.

We go down for another tour round the dungeon downstairs, on the way down Elisa meets a couple, the man in British Airways stewardess outfit complete with vintage badges and accessories, the woman as a sailor with drawn-on moustaches, complete with pompom hat, who she knows from a fetish munch, which she explains to be a non-dress up tea and cake type of event, that people from the fetish scene do to socialise in a more chatty and social environment than clubs. Downstairs, the various contraptions are still in use, we stop for a while in front of a dominatrix whipping another of those hairy middle aged blokes with a bit of a belly, wearing only a boiler hat and a leather mini-skirt. The whipping seems more earnest this time, with the sound of whipping audible over the music, and the 'slave' taking in the pain each time he's getting a hit. The mistress looks on him with the stern look of a mother superior, I remark to Elisa, "she should be wearing a nun outfit, don't you think?"

We find a place to sit and as she's idly toying with the dildo hanging from her belt. I tell her "I'm sorry but you'll never get an orgasm that way", she looks at her plastic penis and says, "oh yeah, I meant to tell you how you do deep-throating." Upstairs I had done a few seconds of token performance briefly sucking her dildo and it's hard enough to keep in your mouth, despite being realistically sized after a mid-size penis, that I wondered how could anyone do actual deep-throating. She explains that it's all a question of mastering your gag reflex, getting it in slowly and it's easy once the head has been over and past the epiglottis. You relax and just adjust the rhythm to take the cock out of the throat, breathe in through the nose and back onto the depth of the shaft. She glances past me as she says that, and adds "I'll show you." She

motions herself above me and asks the guy sitting besides me, whose existence I hadn't previously noticed, "are you hard?" A late twenties graduate type, who could have been to Eton, answers "yes", matter of factly. She asks, politely, "can I suck your cock?", he says, "yes", again, and gets up and unzips his trousers – he has trousers – revealing one of the smallest dicks I've ever seen, a good 2 or 3 inches. She plunges and sucks, enthusiastically enough, keeping all of it in her mouth at the same time, though as a demonstration of deep-throating this is certainly not going to be a convincing experiment. After the best part of 30 seconds he jerks and comes inside her mouth, two or three short bursts, apparently. She lets his cock come out of her mouth; it gets smaller. She looks up and smiles at him, he just says "thanks", smiles awkwardly, and walks away promptly. She looks back at me and says "his come tastes of bechamel" to which I reply, "sorry, I've got no spinach handy, should I ask at the bar?" We laugh. She apologises for the failure it's been as far as demonstrating deep-throating is concerned, but believes it's not difficult, it's just a question of training. I reply, "OK, I'll send the girl to you for a training session next time I get involved with one who can't."

All along in another stall to our left, a bulky muscular middle aged man with a long well groomed handlebar moustache had been whipping, softly, a woman tied to a crucifix as we sat nearby, busy with the deep-throating lesson. He smiles at Elisa. It lasts for a while as they exchange eye contact and smirk at each other. Soon, after he's liberated his mate, she gets up and inquires if it could be her turn. She sets herself on the cross, he whips her, in an even gentler manner than his previous playmate who is hanging around nearby, and who I presume he knew. This is pretty flimsy, she's not even going to get the faintest marks tomorrow with such a lack of force. I reflect that it makes sense that two people need to get to know each other's limits to really play that game, and marvel how codified and civilised the whole exercise appears to be. A couple of minutes later, it's become pointless enough that they stop and start to chat. He explains he's a member of a moustache club, his is a fine piece of work, thin and pointy, perhaps the short length of an A4 sheet across. He explains however that he is an amateur, in it just for fun, "the hardcore guys get much more sophisticated, and it's a good way to travel places, the next World Congress is in Wyoming so I've planned a holiday around it." Pretty likeable gentleman, "hurrah for moustaches," comments Elisa as we walk back upstairs.

We've returned to the dance-floor, and danced. The music is pleasantly thumpy even and I enjoy forgetting about bits of leather among bits of flesh, leather and fabric lit by a red and blue pulsating light, no strobe but almost. As I walk back Elisa is on the side of the dance floor talking to some unusually well built black man, age hard to define but late twenties probably.

He has golden knee height pants and an economic top which doesn't cover much. Golden make-up, sunglasses up on his forehead. He takes a white tube out of his back pocket and sniffs from it. Poppers obviously. He's offering some to Elisa when I join, who replies "cheers, no, it stinks of disinfectant." They keep on chatting nonetheless. I'm too far away to understand most of the conversation, he seems persistent, she seems amused, and after a while, she turns towards me and says, "we're going to the Couples' Room. I'll find you back here in ten, okay?"

Twenty minutes later, she emerges back from the Couples' Room, without Poppers Guy, but with a young second year undergraduate type, a bit shorter than her – arguably without heels. "That's Dan," she says, "our good friend couldn't deliver and he was there and rescued the situation!" I feel a bit like a journalist. We chat about how expensive the drinks are here, when some of his friends come back to collect him because they're leaving. Before departing, he looks at Elisa, hesitates for a second, and requests her number. She looks back at him, with a look of gentle pity that says "no way" in her eyes. He smiles. She pauses, and does give her number. He is, or looks, 21, she's in her mid thirties, and I think he has no clue.

When we decide to leave, the pit dance floor still has a fair number of patrons, albeit now each having a fair amount of space. One of the crash test dummies is there, and has lost their head cover, which is disconcerting. They should be headless! We move past the video DJ, who is having a nap in front of her laptop; and go upstairs to the cloakroom to recover our clothes. Elisa is holding her plastic dick in her hands, "you've been castrated, the party's over," I comment. She yawns back.

We walk to the bus stop, among a crowd of almost normal revellers, in civilian clothes apart from some odd shoes, faded make up or still in place headgear. Moustache man is distinctly recognisable as we reach our stop for the night bus back to central London. Elisa starts talking to him about the inconvenience of coming back from PP, "I'm not paying 30 quid for a taxi", he says as I'm just looking at the swarms of mini-cab drivers plying their trade at the exit of the club, that I can see from here.

In the bus, a girl from the club, though you can only tell from the shoes, sits behind us; probably my age, probably a bit faded even in daytime but still worth a chat, if I could care but I don't. I just sit sleepily, occasionally capturing bits of Elisa and Moustache Man's conversation. "Of course not, I didn't whip you properly, couldn't guess how to calibrate without having gotten to know you first." He seems very refined, after all, for a guy with tits. They go through his CV a bit, he's worked as an accountant for British Telecom, then feared spending his whole life there, and now is doing some

freelance life coaching, for corporates and individuals, which remains a fuzzy thing in my mind. He gives us a card each. It doesn't say "Moustache Man, Life Coach." He should change his name by deed poll.

By the time we've almost reached Tower Bridge, he suggests, "should we have a salt-beef bagel on Brick Lane?" I mumble I'll join in. Elisa emits an elongated but convincing "yeah" through a yawn. Moments later we alight from the bus. The girl I failed to talk to descends behind us. I look back. She looks at us, smiles vaguely, and walks away. No bagel for her, sadly. There's a few passing souls in the street in the morning daylight about whom I'm too exhausted to make up stories in my mind.

The bagel place is obviously an institution. Greasy-spoon styled, with functional furnishings genuinely not updated since the mid-80s, it is as busy as a beehive. We have to queue a bit. The ordering is frantic enough to confuse us, but our moustached companion takes charge with brio. We share a small table for two. The Bagel is the perfect end for the night. "It doesn't taste like bechamel!", I comment to Elisa, who finds enough energy to laugh but not to explain why to Moustache Man.

I notice it's heading for 7am when we stand outside the bagel store looking for our bearings. I'm going West and both Elisa and Moustache Man are more like eastwards, so we congratulate each other for a good night and I depart for my final walk home.

The morning after

It's been a long day at work. I've done approximately nothing, mostly staring blankly at my screen, cleaning up the bottom of my inbox, starting tasks without finishing them, and the like. I nodded profusely through a meeting. Bad sleep. And I didn't even go out last night. Silly. 5pm, I get a text from Henry. Bless. I may soon be awake. I text back, "at the usual, in an hour."

Henry hasn't arrived yet in the pub. It's the typical mix of a couple of not-too-hip-yet hipsters, old school regulars, working or formerly working men, and a strange group of middle aged women, as if on their way to a parent-teacher meeting, but with no trace of kids. They all have a pint, and somehow I can't figure out what they are. Go figure. "Here's the man" says Henry, appearing through the door frame.

I blather a bit about being exhausted, he about some annoying twat who zoomed past and almost pushed over an old lady complete with walking stick on a crossing on the way. "The youth of today", I comment, and then can't help asking, "So, so, so? what happened with the girl from the gig? I need to know." He pauses a moment. "I need a cig!" We move out onto the pavement, and he slowly rolls himself one, lights it up, and says, "well, it was a fun night. After you left Rachel and I had another one and got both very drunk, more snuggling and stuff – all good fun. Then the pub closed, and we got kicked out, realised we were taking the same night bus. I then started seriously considering that there might be some potential and, in the rain, at the bus stop, without me doing or saying much of significance that I can recall, she started lecturing that I was mistaken if I thought I was going to get laid tonight." "Sounds promising" I interrupt. "Yes, you're right, when I got out at my stop she just got out with me, and dissed me when I said she didn't quite live there. It was pretty good sex, for as much as I can remember, it gets a bit fuzzy from there, but she was still there in the morning. I had to ask for her number, she was like, I wasn't going to call back. But she's cool, I wanted to see her again." I inquire if that happened, "Yes, we met again, last Saturday, and it got a bit interesting. She invited me to hers. Then she asked if I was OK with being tied to the bed, which was a bit of a surprise but, I haven't done much of that kind of stuff, but I've been curious, and so I okayed." I ask if he fancied the 'slave' side of things, most guys end up on the

dominant side, I would guess, unless they're submarine commanders or captains of industry in civilian life. "Yeah, there's something attractive with the figure of the dominant woman. Motherhood Freudian fuck-up perhaps.", he smiles. "So she tied you, left, and you spent the weekend there until the neighbours heard your cries?" He laughs, "no, I actually quite enjoyed it, all the bossing around was quite good, I might return for some more of that. Though there was a moment where she sort of left, like went to the toilet, then the kitchen, then the door of the flat slammed. I got almost panicky but she returned after a few minutes. She had been taking the bin out." I comment that it's novel to do that in the middle of sex action. "Yeah, that was a bit disconcerting but was brief enough and I was sufficiently intoxicated not to have time to worry, and, you know, basically I trusted her, it's kind of a precondition to the whole game." I ask, "Did you do that code word thing to stop?", and he replies that 'Pineapple' was the word. "Didn't have to use it, though I don't know, if I hadn't been drunk, perhaps I would have, it's not that anything really went over the limit but she seemed to blur the border between 'acting' and 'being' at times, but well she was probably more drunk than me. Interesting girl, that's for sure. And she has stamina, we finished the bottom half of a bottle of whisky between us that night."

"So, are you guys an item? It's quite romantic that random chat-up with online mashup thing" I tell Henry. "Well, well, well. I don't know. I quite like her. Might be worth having a go. She hasn't replied my last text for meeting later this week though, maybe she's just going to disappear. But I'm not going to bore you too much with Rachel, you went to PP with Elisa, I hear, how was that?"

"It's a fancy dress party, really, if of the more intricate kind." I then tell him about Elisa's various antics, and that I actually don't know how it ended with Moustache Man. "Typical!" he agrees. "Did you pull?" he asks. "Well you know me, I wouldn't pull in a brothel unless it's an internet one, but yeah it's sort of no more, I did address one girl who was standing at the edge of that pit dance floor, something the video that was playing, to which she replied 'My boyfriend is down there' or something in that direction, and I wasn't even asking anything explicit. She was probably a bit like a tourist there too, she seemed on her guard." "Perfect match!" says Henry. "Yeah, let's have another beer."

The mystery mums have left while Henry collected the next round from the bar, still unsolved. "And what about that speed dating thing," asks Henry, as he puts the glasses on the table. "Ah. I think I might have made a – male – chum. Some guy called Petro with a double life" I say. "What kind of double life?" he asks. I explain the weeks in London, weekends with the wife and family in Milan scheme. "Jesus, I couldn't be arsed to maintain that sort of

pretence”, says Henry, “let alone it's a tad dodgy, perhaps, as a setup.” “Well you never know what sort of dead end life leads you to, it does feel a bit like a trap, defo not jealous about his setup I have to say, but we got along, whatever. Apart from that the girls were sort of OK, lots of nondescript ones, but it's cold really, and no one matched me afterwards, except one lawyer who then didn't follow on, and I wasn't that keen on her anyway. I think the girls go to that sort of stuff with all the shields on max strength. It probably could have gone somewhere with a couple of them had we known each other a little and got drunk together in a friendlier context, but there, mid-week and in your face mating setup, it's almost impossible. Perhaps it works fine for cases of love at first sight, and even then, it may take away that magic too. But it's fun enough, I may do it again occasionally. You should come to that too!” He replies, “When Rach has dumped me, I will, and I guess if you go to that sort of thing with zero expectations you can't really be disappointed much.” I tell him, “Well someone could be rude, or the like, or you could find it disheartening, but then it's fun too. Not a revolution though, I wonder how many couples they actually match, I suspect not many.”

“Your Italian guy makes me think I'm overdue a holiday, Italy would do nicely, a nice change from the grey glumness round these parts. Milan, perhaps, or Florence. I fancy Florence,” Henry says, “I was briefly in Milan overnight and I felt like I'd get arrested for not being stylish enough.” I remark that he's more than stylish enough, and add “I had a date with a native Florentine once, she was saying she escaped from a closed society, didn't like the place.” Henry then argues that it must be no problem as a tourist, or even as a resident expat, you can largely remain blind to layers of indigenous social sclerosis. I nod. “Are you still in touch with that Florentine?” he queries. “No, it was a one date thing, she was OK but I couldn't be enthusiastic really. Bit short, typical Italian short, dark hair, dark eyes. I don't even remember if she or I stopped talking, I might have offered a second date, can't recall.” I say. “OK, I'll have to find my Florentine myself,” says Henry as I interrupt, “or you could go on a date-an-Italian website, there must be one for that niche, even though niche websites tend to be abysmal.” Henry agrees and we settle on him going to a mainstream site with a country of origin filter, if he could be bothered, but he rarely can be.

We move on to Italian politics and agree it's a tragedy, without neglecting that at least Berlusconi seems to get profusely laid. “He's less anal than Tony Blair, did I ever tell you my millilitre theory about him by the way? It's brilliant!”, inquires Henry. I shake my head. “That's simple. Remember the Gulf war. Not much reason to do that. Lot of posturing on justifying it. The guy is clearly driven. Why? Going to war or not has very little impact on his daily life, he won't get richer or anything, why go through all this stress for nothing? What drives politicians, or any high power people to go on grand

projects that are high stress and objectively pretty close to meaningless? See where I'm going?", he asks. I suggest he might have superior motives trying, perhaps naively, and however misguided, to make the world a better place. "Yeah, rubbish, everybody would like to make the world a better place, on paper, and if it wasn't hard. Debating can be fun though, but if he was into rhetoric he would work for a newspaper as a columnist, or stay at home ranting on a blog or an Internet foreign policy forum. Come on! Why?" he insists. "He might get laid? Chicks dig power and stuff. But he's stuck with Cherie. I don't know what he finds in her, if I had been through all the hassle of becoming a celebrity politician I'd want to find someone cuter, and less of a pontificating pain." Henry states that she's not ugly. "Squashed face, pretty? OK, it's not proper ugly, but still not my cup of tea." I submit. "It's just because you're a tit man. Anyway, he would get laid. With her or a lover or whatever. Imagine the erotic power of your man – yeah I know, imagine it for a moment! – your man coming back to bed after a day at work and telling you he's got two thousand, or whatever, random foreigners, killed. Just because he could. Spurious reasons whatever, your man can kill. Random strangers! And with remote control, he doesn't even need to go and butcher them himself, wouldn't you be all wet at the idea?" I have to consent, were I Tony Blair's wife faithfully waiting for him to return home, I might well become all wet at the idea he can get the sky to throw fire onto random foreigners. "See. Exactly. So what we should have done is a scientific study, where we would have measured the volume, or some other proxy for intensity, of Tony Blair's ejaculate, and plotted that against the estimates of Iraqis killed on the ground. It would correlate nicely, I'm sure. And you could give the price of an Iraqi life in terms of millilitres of Her Majesty's Prime Minister's ejaculate." I can only admire Henry's mastery of the scientific method and lament with him the lack of data collection on this important area of research.

"Do you think he fucked the trains for the same reason?" I ask Henry. He seems taken aback, trainspotting is not a good way to pull for sure, I continue, "it's power anyway, though perhaps it gets misapplied to the less productive, more nerdy activities." Henry pauses, and as if he'd gotten back on track, says "Maybe he didn't fuck up the train system on purpose, the whole theory of drive isn't incompatible with people trying to do good, and just fucking up, same as in Iraq, he could have hot rodded Cherie, and saved mankind, at the same time. I guess your dick actually may physically become bigger if you pull that one." "Shut up!" is the only answer I have to that.

He does shut up. Fuck, silence, I'm in charge of continuing the conversation. "And the fuck ups are pretty miniature sometimes, nobody could do it by design, you know that short train line somewhere up North that only has one weekly train one way because the train operator doesn't want to run it but is

obliged to in the conditions of their operating license, but can fulfil that obligation by just going one way once a week.” Henry says that he knows and thought of going there to take that train just because of that. “That would be very trainspotty of you! And by the by, talking of the wastelands north of London Town, have you seen that rounded department store with aluminium circles on it, in Birmingham. I had a stop there en route to somewhere, I can't remember how I ended up in Birmingham,” – “Neither can most people who live there,” he interrupts – and I continue waxing lyrical about said department store. He hasn't heard of it, even when I tell him it must have been the most famous new building of the year in the UK when it was finished a few years ago. “You're a brickspotter!”, he concludes. I admit, despite being unable to avoid lecturing that this building is not made of brick and I'm really more like Beton Man. He laughs, and says, “you wish!”

I ask him what's the best station in the UK then, we might agree on something. He suggests Edinburgh Waverley. I've been there but don't remember much apart from some fine cast iron work, but I then go on a tangent with the story of freshly disembarked Americans standing outside the station and noting that it's convenient that Edinburgh Castle was built next to the station. “It's not as good as you being Beton Man”, he insists, pointedly.

He then goes on waxing lyrical about the Edinburgh Festival. I wax cynical that it's the sort of thing I always plan to do this year, but forget about, until I hear it's in its second week and everything is booked out. “You'd miss a free beer festival if it was even vaguely hard work to get there”, he smiles.

“Listen, we'd have won if it hadn't been for this tosser”, says one of our neighbour behind me. I turn briefly to see a full table of city boys, at the dawn of ageing, rather than the builder types I had inferred from the subject matter. “I think I had enough beer for today”, comments Henry. I enquire about his health but he only mumbles something about “old” as we depart.

School night

Half past seven, in the drizzling rain, on a Monday evening. I'm a few minutes late arriving at the pub. It is almost empty, with a distinct smell of stale beer. I think I should have chosen a more classy place. A couple of suits at the bar, enjoying a regulatory start of the week beer. They could be in compliance. No, too good looking for compliance. Not that they're good looking. But you normally have to be below average for compliance. A couple in the corner, I can't fathom a story, not workers, odd place to be tourists and they don't seem to be out of their familiar environment. Who knows. The waitress is a bit rotund, late twenties, nondescript face, and a bit moody. Nothing to get excited about, despite my proclivity for getting excited by anything female behind a bar. My date hasn't arrived, I had only joked about the concrete bridge behind her on her profile picture. She wasn't aware of the background really, of course. Girls. Call me prejudiced. Apart from that her profile was okay, no show-stoppers that I can recall, apart from, yes, perhaps, kids. Whatever. If there's a dad in the equation that could mitigate, anyway you don't need to worry about such mere logistical issues with people you've not slept with, I ponder, as I watch intensely the poor wiring around one of the emergency exit signs, cables coming out, greasy dust stuck around the connector with one wire dangling up in the air. It's still lit. Could it be a fire hazard?

“Hi”, she says as she interrupts me from my reverie, a second for my brain to context switch back into the pub; hey, “hi.” Glad she found me I might not have recognised her. She does have a look of years of motherhood having taken their toll. Not that she's not still subtly attractive, with a particular strength on the subtle angle. I settle in with inquiries about the weather outside, I haven't been outside for the best part of 20 minutes after all, while I slide into dating mode, having enough spare neurons to comfort myself that I like her more than the considerably younger and probably lighter-travelling waitress.

She's doing some kind of editorial work for ITV News, I ask the obvious, and no she's not on screen. “It's not bad on the glamour scale”, I comment. “Paid rubbish, conditions OK, the team's great, the boss a pain”, she summarises. I enquire on her boss, after running around him being essentially but merely a

petty moron, “and there's no sex angle on this tale?”, I ask, “you'll never get paid to get your story in the Sun then!” She smiles, and replies, “No, sadly. He's with a cute bimbo, very proud of that. Picture on desk, parading at every function where he can bring her. He's ugly as hell as well. Yuck.” I ask if she finds him ugly because he's a moron or is that more of a raw thing. “He is plain ugly even if he wasn't a dick.” I doubt it, but I don't insist.

“Is this New Order?” she asks, of the background song playing in the pub. “Hm, I don't recognise it, it's a bit muffled, probably some later electro homage, but then I'm not an expert on these things. Do you prefer New Order to Joy Division?” I ask. “Don't start me on this, I was a total Ian Curtis fan despite him being dead by the time I got into the music.” I interrupt, “Very cerebral of you, and much more classy than some random cute face from a boy band.” She nods. We discuss music a bit further. I'm seemingly successfully steering the discussion so that it stays at the edge of my ignorance until time comes to order another drink. She's doing beer, I'm doing wine.

I comment that the wine is pretty okay given the lowly standard of the establishment, I apologise not to have been a bit more picky on the place but she argues it's convenient and it's neither utter crap nor pretentious, which is not half bad an achievement in London these days. The evening continues gently meandering in pleasant chit chat, and I start feeling I'm going to like her more, she's dressed conveniently sober so that the distraction is minimal. I indeed have some trouble figuring out what might hide under the layering.

As she sits back, coming back from the toilet, I ask, not thinking much about it, whether her grandmother did her sweater. “Is it that bad?” she asks as I realise I might have committed an etiquette mishap. I backtrack, the sweater is not even bad, just a bit plain, and looks machine made, with criss-crossing pattern of muted blue and green and I try to so explain. I can't quite tell if she's genuinely upset or just counter bantering. Someone pop up with a smiley sign, please! Offline communication is sometimes difficult without emoticons. But after a while she's happily reconciled with her beer, whichever way. The conversation gently drifts towards the safer shores of holiday destinations, she recommends Sofia in winter, she's done a TV project there. “Not a British expat buys property show, was it?” I ask. No, it was a deeper thing on the document counterfeiting industry though the actual journalist had to bribe the police chief to meet alleged counterfeiters and see his collection of fake passports. “Could be convenient”, I wonder. I've often pondered if you could get away with tenners printed at home in clubs or at farmers' markets; and by the way, I ask her if she knows that printer firmware often includes code to detect some patterns on major currencies so as to prevent people scanning them and printing out copies. I say that I find

that too big brotherly, that people should be able to do what they want with their printers, and whoever takes banknotes should have a cursory look at them, given that a home printed note is never going to be very convincing. As I pause for breath, I wonder if that errand into geekdom is disqualifying or compensating for the mum sweater; but she just nods gently and remarks that her glass is empty.

The pub was getting into closing mood, even though it's only half past ten. We're now on the street. It's not raining anymore but the pavement is still wet. I find it quite decorative. "It's just a rainy pavement", she says, unromantically. The couple of half decent places that won't close at 10 on a Monday are on the way to my place. Well it's more half than decent, and after a short lightweight walk, she talks about her kids having been a pain yesterday, they should not need that much hand holding at 9 and 12. I inquire if they're parked with the dad tonight, and indeed they are.

As we enter the pub she's gone to talking about her daughter's swimming exploits, she got a medal at a school or sport club event or some similar sporty thing I can't be bothered understanding. I nod dutifully, relaxed in the flow of conversation going on auto pilot. I ponder if that's wise to have another glass of wine, but then I don't fancy a mint tea. The bar can't be said to be crowded. A few more business types, not those from previous, more like some who did some deal and don't have a tomorrow to worry about. A couple of twenty-somethings, could be the trust fund kids of scenester folklore, though they don't ooze money convincingly enough and it's not really the right part of town. Besides I doubt parents ever really bother setting up a trust fund when they can just play the ATM and wire on demand. She upgraded to vodka and coke. I think she's stronger than me.

We find some corner sofa, each on one side of the angle, which could be comfy if they hadn't skimped on the foam fittings, probably the cheapest available at the DIY shed, thin enough that you can distinctly feel the plank below your bottom. She sits contentedly on her side and I'm starting to wonder if it's time for some action, but there is a tightly fitted table in between us and the corner is a bit in the way. She says that it's not that bad a place for a late Monday. "But it's not trendy enough for TV people. None of these guys could be your people, could they?" She has a look round and agrees. "The kids could get a job placement through Dad I guess" she adds. We discuss the merits and demerits of plutocracy, which thankfully is a relatively contained problem at these latitudes. She tells of her ex's new wife's brother who's from Southern Italy, studied as a lawyer, spent ten years in crap jobs, and then only got a career when he moved to Canada some years later. She digresses through her relationship with her ex, which seems to be reasonably jolly and digested – they split up six years ago now. My

mental accountant endorses that. I hesitate a bit and then ask if she dumped him, and she did indeed. I note that I have the impression it's oft the women dumping the man in family situations, or without actually, men seem to rarely have the balls, or just cheat with a bimbo but without being ready to upset the status quo. She concurs freely, and says "enough about my ex, I want another beer." I've not finished my drink so I pass but go up to the bar to get her one.

When I'm back, she has moved the table slightly but decisively, and seats in an hybrid of invitation and awkwardness. I improbably ask if she prefers real ale, and before she has time to elaborate much on anything beery, we're kissing. None of the customary resistance here. Our corner is cosy and dark enough to lose a hand below her granny sweater, and, a moment after our mouths separated, she says "You like it, my sweater, after all?" to which I reply that's it is awesome, but not as much as what is inside.

We comfortably finish off our drinks during the next half hour. The youths are gone. A couple of shadowy characters are at the other end of the room. The group of suits is still there, having moved onto the mezzanine. "Time to go, I think", she says. She invites me to take her to her night bus stop, which is past my place. I get up, feel that the room is moving a bit, but I can still walk.

The street is a breath of fresh air. We walk along, I feel I'm too drunk to make much of an attempt to take her home. And do I mind anyway? I show her the building I live in as it becomes visible in the distance. We walk a bit more. "Can I use the toilets at yours?" she asks. "Sure" I reply. I think she's been to the toilet about half an hour ago in the pub. Nice. We get up, kiss in the lift, under the watchful eye of the CCTV camera. I have a bit of trouble operating the door and lock at this time of night but manage on the second try. We get in, I sit on the bed as she takes her coat off. We're fondling on the bed before I can indicate to her where the toilets are. MILFs rock, I think to myself, you never could pull a single girl on a Monday evening. That said, I'm not in a perfect shape to best enjoy the experience. The room is turning a bit now. We pause. She goes to the loo. I feel slightly better.

She comes back, lies down next to me, and we kiss gently, then more energetically, and then become sufficiently entangled to have the table lamp fall on the floor. Unbreakable plastic thankfully, thanks Habitat. I open her blouse, she looks for my zip, I manage the blouse only half way, and my trousers have so far resisted the assault. We pause. She takes off her top herself, I take my trousers off and remember that I'm drunk. I state so. "You're more robust than me", I say. She goes to the kitchen and looks for a glass of water, "where are your glasses?" I answer that I've only got broken

ones and dirty ones, “get a teacup.” She comes back with unconsecrated water. I drink. She drinks. I kiss her. She fondles back. The room turns. “Bloody room can't stay in place”, I say as I lay back. I'm officially too drunk to fuck. “Boys”, she laments, disappointedly amused.

She lays by my side. We've been like that for a while. It's nice. “Should I go?”, she asks. I mumble, I think it's OK she stays, I'll be sober by the morning, I don't know. Decisions, too hard work. So I mumble. “Yeah, nay, maybe, I'm drunk.” She puts her bra back on, buttons up her blouse slowly, fastens her trousers – that she hadn't taken off properly yet – and then gets her jacket. She looks at me. She smiles. She knees back towards the bed and kisses me. I kiss her back. Harder. She falls back onto the bed. I put my hand below her coat, below the sweater, find the shirt's buttons, she helps. She mumbles. She kisses. I manage to take off her blouse this time. I struggle with the bra, but still manage. She pauses and takes the rest away, takes off her trousers. I kiss her breasts, which are not spectacular but not bad either, it's fun. I pause for breath. The room is turning. Slower. Progress. I feel sick. A bit. I turn back. “No no it's OK.” Fondle. She revives me through gentle kissing. As it stops turning I grab her back. I even have a half decent erection. She plays with it with her hand, expertly. She starts riding me. Just rubbing. Rubbing some more. We embrace and it gets in. She moans.

“Bit ups and downs but the finale was pretty good”, she says later on, as we rest. We chat about her childhood, school, study, all fairly respectable, the travels with the hubby, the being hijacked by Kalashnikov-touting thugs in Guinea during a NGO assignment. Actually I want to know more about the Kalashnikov event but it doesn't feel right to ask, and I'm still not in a state to think much so the most titillating anecdote of the night slips away, come and gone in a couple of sentences, like a pretty face popping up on a street corner and vanished as fast. We're like old acquaintances as the morning light emerges.

We half slept and are in a pleasant stupor as her phone rings. “Alarm!” she mumbles. “How organised!” I remark. She says you have to be with kids. “You have to pick them up now, dearie?” I ask. “No, thank god, I mean generally. But still. Don't actually have to get into work before the afternoon but have to get my act together.” I want some breakfast. I feel tired and hungover but not that bad considering the state I was in last night. She takes a quick shower, and still manages to be dressed before me. We go down. Starbucks is the easiest. So we stand by the window, watching delivery trucks for the market opposite charging carcasses, with suits and hipsters walking past on the pavements. “It's a bit of a crossroads, here, funny morning people.” She notes, “Yeah, media tarts behind us, the rear guard of the working class opposite, preserved by the City corporation, the thing is owned

by the City you know, as a permanent exhibit of real life perhaps, and then the money types.” I want to comment some more but I’m too tired to finish sentences productively. I sip my coffee. Think I need to go back to bed not more coffee. Lightweight. We look out of the window. Silently. Pleasantly.

She looks at her mobile. “Have to go! God I’m tired.” She sighs. She gets up, buttons up, we’re in front of the Starbucks. The tube is that away. “Thanks for the night, you’ve got my number.” I kiss her, briefly, on the lips. Hug. She walks away, I walk away, slowly, back to bed.

Air travel

I hate organising holidays. So a last minute decision it will be. It's been too long since I've last been away. Arizona Tina happens to be at a conference in Tokyo in two weeks' time. No passport requirement? Tick. Exotic? Tick. Never been to Asia? Tick. So Tokyo it is, but I just have a couple of weeks to plan. I wasted the last couple of days. Holidays are a painful optimisation problem, all the possible combinations of accommodation, places and flights are impossibly tricky to resolve.

I've got email correspondence to follow on as well. The Italian guy from the speed dating wants to meet; the psychoanalyst, who kissed well, hasn't replied; the Monday mum seems keen. She's okay, but I don't know. What to do. I'll procrastinate. Send a non-committal missive, say I'm busy and going away. Maybe I should make a decision. I contentedly think, it's okay to have some choice. Enjoy it while it lasts. It won't.

Oh, too much choice! Flights to Japan are not cheap. Lots of kerosene I guess. I play with a multitude of combinations of days and incoming airports. I try premium economy, combinatorial explosion. I look up hotels, then clubs in Tokyo. Google seems to find some pages, there's stuff for English speakers. A couple of hours fly past. I check the dating site for a break. I boringly browse through the list of matches. Okay. Yeah. Nothing exciting. The problem with getting laid is that it takes your standards up, so you never end anywhere. Sigh. I change the match town to Tokyo. There are lots of Asian girls in Tokyo! I change town back to London and go back to flight search engine. And what if I flew first class? I try. Six thousand quid. That's a bit steep. I look harder. Suomair, via Helsinki, two grand return. That's much cheaper than six. A bit decadent but I'm not decadent that often. Ponder. It's more comfy. Twelve hours is a long time. I can pretend to be rich. And you get metal cutlery, though arguably I could buy 200 very nice forks for two grand, and keep them. I ponder a little more.

All this holiday stuff is exhausting. I go to YouTube to relax with some junk. Search 'real suicide'. First hit, some kid looking for attention, by making some poor spoof video rather than committing suicide. Some guy fainting on Italian TV. I'm not impressed. He probably woke up soon after. Some spammers. After a dozen tries, I admit defeat. YouTube does keep within

family friendly boundaries. Amusing. There must be a Ph.D topic in there somewhere, I reflect. And what shite taste I have. It's getting late but I should make up my mind. I go and have a pee, and eat a slice of stale bread with old jam. The old jam seems to be having a victorious middle age. The bread not so much, getting really bitter with time. I think that I wouldn't get stale jam on Suomair. I go back to the PC, and hesitate further. I try another search engine, and find the same flight, or several, from five grand up. I have jam without bread. I drop some on the keyboard. Bother. Swipe the keyboard, which stays greasy. Eventually I book the Suomair flight. Well wait, I don't have two grand in my account. Being rich is hard work. Transfer from savings account, hope it still gets through, and then finish off ordering decadence.

Fresh with a sense of achievement I go to bed and think I should progress in the paperback that's lying on the bedside table. I haven't touched it in two weeks. Haruki Murakami. How suitable. Girly literature, I got curious after reading it quoted in so many profiles. You need to understand how the enemy thinks to penetrate their lines of defence, or so told me my logistician, who's read too much Machiavelli. It's light and a bit flowery, but still enjoyable. Cats and whores, what's not to like? I remember that last week I stumbled on a profile where the girl said she didn't talk to boys who put Murakami in their fave books list. She looked quite good. I'm all for equal opportunity, I'd date Murakami fans and haters alike, each have their own advantages, I'm sure, perhaps you need both. I gather the wife is the fan and the lover is the hater. Thereby lies the dilemma, how to write a profile that is open minded, catches both sides, yet is not dull. Maybe I need several profiles. I hold the book on the marked-up page from last time, but still haven't read a line. Maybe I should just have a wank. I hesitate. Cats and wordy whores win – for now.

I've got quite captivated with researching Japan online. Maybe it's much better than the real thing and I shouldn't bother with the flight. The reality dispatches are annoying though. I even forgot to wank. It's 2am. I am working tomorrow after all. Check email a last time. One spam. Check dating site. Not even spam. Maybe I need an account at another site.

I notice Arizona Tina is online on Skype. Start chat. She doesn't reply. I go back to web trash. I should go to bed. Ding, she's online. I tell her about the plan. I'm glad I didn't even get the date wrong. How exciting to meet again. A professional conference doesn't leave that much time: she leaves on the Saturday morning. She'll squeeze me in. "I'm sure you will, you know how to squeeze," I type. She reports on new boyfriend. "The one you met online after you had sworn you'd abandon online dating as useless?" "Yeah that one" she confirms. I demand a description. Accountant, but groovy. She's not

quite sure. They have complementary families. Sort of matching kid set. "That makes how many, five? You'll get economies of scale", I comment. She describes he has a dodgy arrangement for visiting his ex. She has some doubts. The arrangement doesn't look dodgy to me, really, vaguely weird at best. I tell her so. She keeps on. Half an hour into it, I have to remark, "you like him don't you? Invite me when you get married!" She sends smileys. And denies. "Yeah, just another guy. Probably will turn out to be a tosser." Maybe. Maybe not. "Fuck, it's past 3am. I have to dump you." I close the lid and disappear to bed.

Business class

So. Welcome to decadence. I'm at Heathrow. There are construction works everywhere. It feels like a hodge podge of institutional and shopping mall architecture, or lack thereof. From the train to the hall, there's no outside. There's no building to speak of either. I miss proper ostentatious airports, the cathedrals of the late twentieth century, this is not one. Maybe when it's finished, if ever, it won't be so dominated by boardings and being a building site. But it's not promising. Some sections seem finished. The plasterboard is fresh and clean and well joined on the new side, but that's all; it doesn't seem much of an improvement. Massive queue to some Gulf states. Big suitcases. Huge suitcases. The queue for the Finns is much shorter. And the decadent class desk has just two people in front of me. Feels civilised. Fat businessman, who must run out of breath quite quickly, middle class, middle aged, can't imagine the exact profession. Lawyer or journalist, perhaps. Someone should rename business class Decadent Class. I muse about starting an airline with a decadent class. Why is luxury often so bland? I show my passport. Corporate smile, the counter girl, mature for a counter girl, is cute enough, dark blue uniform is fitting. It would be borderline suitable for Punishment Park with some accessories. My airline would have the cabin crew in swimsuits – the men too. Captain in bikini – the men too. I get my passport back and a boarding card and am dispatched to the fast track security check.

Just a dozen people in front of me, and it does go rather swiftly. Same checking stalls as the plebs. I feel lame. I'm queueing behind a short Chinese-looking business type, US passport in hand. A better dressed but not so well preserved elderly Milanese woman, with short bald besuited hubby. Too far to check they do indeed have an Italian passport. Why are people waving their passport at baggage check anyway, it's not that they actually check passports there. Pass through. I put my shoes back on, and have to struggle through the shopping section, there's no fast lane for that. God, that's an ugly airport. Sitting is crowded. Too many families with too much luggage. I almost forget that today I actually have access to the airline lounges. I look for the sign, and fail to find it. I pass more shops, more families. Here's a sign! Upstairs. Corridor, toilet, more functional corridors. Here's the lounge. A pretty young thing at the desk checks my boarding card nonchalantly, she looks bored. I think it'd be easy to print a fake business boarding card and get

the free muesli and beer even when travelling cattle. More corridors, same as outside but with some carpet and cheap wallpaper instead of beige paint.

I finally reach the room. This is nondescript enough, standard business hotel type decor, despite some obvious if not outstanding effort: dark wood and a few prints, some detailing, standard design furniture, reasonably well coordinated. Bland but not actively offensive. McDonalds does as well these days though. I hear some other airlines have been trying harder. It's pretty small within the giant complex that is this airport, must fit a couple of hundred people at most. The problem with the free booze and snacks is that you don't quite want to get trashed before a long flight. I settle for a little wine and crisps. Some magazines. Of the broadsheets, only the Telegraph and Times. And the FT, of course. I guess it's one of the last redoubts of the English upper class or those who aspire to pretend they're part of it, but surely you can be rich or decadent without being reactionary. I get a Telegraph for entertainment. I feel immediately fifteen years older. I sit in a strategic corner position, in a comfy armchair suitable for the chic retirement home, to observe the fauna. I take a sip from a tall wine glass.

In fact the crowd looks pretty normal, just a bit more expensively dressed and manicured than usual. They do get haircuts more often than average I'm sure. I should have not showered and worn old clothes for fun. Though these days even punks have a washing machine and are finely manicured. Indeed a mohawk must be as much hard work each morning as the numerous layers of make-up of the mid-sixties lady who's taking position at the other end of the room, near the muesli booth. It's not a success, probably makes her look ten year older. Or maybe she is in her eighties. The attendant husband type does seem mid sixties – brown tweed jacket, open shirt, thin corduroy; but not the provincial ageing teacher type; newer, better cut, perhaps. Behind an air of light but permanent weariness, he looks fairly wholesome. Missed a career as a farmer perhaps? Opposite, a young lawyer or consultant type, pink top, casual plus, tall brunette, not particularly younger, it might be the mark 1 spouse.

I'm staring at some model type, tall, skinny, mid twenties, oozing an air of sophistication – maybe she has an actual real job and isn't a model. She could definitely play a model in a movie. Yellow and green striped top, suitably tight, mid-length skirt, black patterned tights, mid height heels. "Hello!", says a modestly familiar voice, breaking my deep concentration on the girl – the rest of the room had disappeared for a moment. I turn, look, and I'm surprised, it's one of the top execs from my company, one of those important enough to be shuttling permanently over the pond between the head office in New York and London. His wife is behind him. He's almost tall, early fifties, not quite the angry frustrated alpha male type with the stamina to end up at

the top of such piles. No executive belly yet. He's half way in many ways, verging on likeable even for a management type. I had seen his wife from a distance at a Christmas party. She's a bit plain. And looked to be a pain, then; now, she's arguing with the staff at the muesli booth. He's asking me what assignment I'm on. "I'm just going to Japan for leisure. And it's not that I had enough air miles, but I'm not into cattle class and it was a great deal, I guess these Finns are desperate to fill their seats. Plus it's almost a straight line to Japan with the right map projection." He looks modestly puzzled. He starts to point out that he's weary of all the flying, even in business, as the wife comes back. She nods disinterestedly when he starts introducing me, and motions him, with a slight facial tick, to move on and go to a table further away for their preflight collation. He smiles goodbye, with no words, meaning that he's got to go. As he follows her I wonder if she also has a dog. It does leave a bit of an impression of a husband as pet. Who knows maybe it's one of those co-dependent relationships, mutually creative or mutually destructive. She's not even particularly attractive, and seems authoritarian and a pest, and boring as well, to crown it all, though all this is totally speculative given how little I've seen of her. I think that he could get better, what's the point of being so wealthy and professionally successful – for better or worse a pretty sought after characteristic among the fairer sex – to end up with that? I wonder if he's got a second life, but I think he doesn't. I might be wrong.

The model has vanished. I check the departure board: ten minutes to go. Delayed fifteen minutes. Would be silly to miss the flight from the lounge. I finish my glass of wine, and simply sit being idiotically smug for a few minutes.

More corridors. More beige paint. Another departure board, I'm almost late. They're almost finished with the plutocratic boarding. I wave past. It's quick. I reach the aircraft door, "hi!" says a middle aged Nordic blonde, a boy on the other side, as Nordic but twenty years younger. He could be her toyboy. I turn left. It's just a transfer flight, so regular A320 with just a curtain to define the business class, with just two people for each side of three seats. All a bit silly.

I wait. The plane is taxiing. I wait some more. I look through the window. Four aircrafts are in front of us. London is too rich, there are too many planes here. Take off. It's a pretty normal flight except we get some slightly posh snacks served in 3 rounds. I read the in-flight magazine, look at shows in Helsinki, which do not sound particularly exciting. That Alvar Aalto retrospective could be something however. I remind myself that I'm not actually going to Helsinki other than to land and take off again. I dose off a bit, bored.

I get to the transit area after disembarking. What a change from Heathrow. Scandinavian wooden highlights can be seen everywhere, it's light and subdued but pretty pleasant. There's just an hour before the Tokyo flight. Lots of Nokia phones in the duty free. It's small, you're not drowned in a cheap shopping mall. Sit down, and wait. I'm getting too tired to read anything. I vaguely watch the crowd, but just see a lack of things to look at. I pick up another copy of the inflight magazine and read more about the city I'm not staying in. I ponder about the idea of going somewhere, with a good book about the place, and just stay in the hotel and absorb the atmosphere through the window. The last call for my flight comes on the tannoy.

The big Airbus A340 has two business class seats abreast, left right and centre. The alternating shades of a blue colour scheme are rare. The seats are staggered, as has been the fashion for the past few years. Seating and furnishings appear a few years old, the plane too. It seems there's enough people for just half the seats, no wonder it was cheap.

A sophisticated Japanese lady, western upmarket clothing, sits ahead with a younger one. Geisha, not geisha? Or mother and daughter. I wonder. Tired business type in stripped canary yellow ironed shirt, they still do these, in front of me. It's all very middle aged, besides a couple of younger geek types in the opposite, finance or venture cap, perhaps. I set myself in my seat and look at the distant and dense woods through the cabin window. Diagonally I can see a tattooed fashion icon guy, mid 50s, Asian, tight leather jacket, skinny fit trousers of indeterminate matt shiny material; and besides a couple of fat Americans in their sixties, as you see by the truckloads on US internal business flights. Are they tourists or something more interesting? No princess sitting next to me, just a free seat, it will be a quiet flight.

The gentle decadence proceeds comfortably between ceremonial snacks, lights going down for pretend night. I watch some naff but entertaining romantic comedy, and then beautiful Siberia pass below. A middle aged Finnish woman, wearing the weight of the corporate ladder as well as you can, discusses with a stewardess, of a similar age, who's lamenting they won't see each other anymore because the former has lost her reason for her previously habitual commute between Helsinki and Tokyo. I didn't catch why. Their conversation seems pregnant with a certain sadness behind the quietly upbeat voices. They swap tales on their respective kids' student lives, with just a subtle hint of melancholia.

I'm half asleep. I emerge for no good reason. The American couple's wife is in a pink night gown with some green paste on her face going down the aisle. The Japanese trendy at an angle is picking his nose. Breakfast is announced. Something that looks like Kamchatka through the window. Pretty. That's too

much entertainment, I put the screen to flight map mode. Kamchatka it is indeed. I'm getting tired. The croissant is miraculously edible.

The plane is taxiing at Narita International, it's a long way from the Finnish of the in-flight announcement. I'm exhausted. The corridors, tidier than Heathrow but no more decorative, are endless. I sleepwalk through customs where there is hardly any queue. I find trains to town, which wasn't difficult. "Ticket receipt enlightened?" asks the machine. I smile and push the button. I get an enlightened ticket sans receipt, hopefully for the right train. It doesn't keep my card. It should be easy, the hotel is by the station at the other end of the airport connection. I need a real bed.

Busy station. Commuters galore. I've been warned there are no street signs, but the layout is easy enough. I go through a cramped commercial thoroughfare, tiny shops, garish signs everywhere. Piles of plastic kitchen paraphernalia in bright colours are on the right, a Chinese-looking restaurant on the left. A phone charger store. Another Chinese restaurant, neon signs and red ideograms. Spaghetti telephone and electric cables obscure the narrow sky slit. Heritage does not seem to be a concern here. I miss my hotel by one street. Then find it. It's a narrow building. Every narrow building is half a yard from the next, to shake happily in quakes, I conjecture. I get in, the check in is easy, I barely talk, in the room. Tiny but comfy. Venetian store, with a view onto the wall, half a yard away, of the next building. Redefining what a window is. I lay on the bed and fall asleep without the energy to take my shoes off.

Big in Japan

Soon after sunset, the lights are shining on Akibara's electronics tourism shopping constellation. A lot of small stores, with similar inventories, odd specialities here and there, I can't be bothered to be interested in actual shopping but gadget stalking is always fun. The chaotic neon landscape, in and out, is not pretty, not designed, but is strangely consistent, a fractal repetition between the slick and sick, the tiny and the big, an organic hierarchy that works. Dusk is the electronics twilight. I enter one store, three meters wide, five storeys. Boxes, bland light, a bit too hostile to find erotica in the sales girl. Lots of sales boys. Short, skittish, yet silent. I look at some improbable watch cum micro-CD player, with dust, improbably relic from a decade ago. 50000 yen, I'm almost tempted. But I move on, however alluring the idea of curating a museum of technological dead ends might be. Next there's a Chinese restaurant, a power supplies store, several identikit laptop stores come one after another in flashing synchronicity. Next there's an automated restaurant! Delight! I stand confused in front of an ordering panel. I ask a student-type Japanese girl, who doesn't understand my query. I push a button below the photo of a meal. It prints a ticket. That seems simple enough. A waitress quickly ushers me to some place, and some time later, swiftly puts a plate much looking like the photo in front of me. Now they just need to get robotic waitresses and cooks sorted to reach the Future proper.

As I'm eating my noodles with red and yellow cubes of unknown stuff and some sort of weed on it, Arizona Tina texts: "Get this?" Yes, roaming works, I text her back triumphantly. Then I ponder it might only work one way. Finish yellow cubes. Ding. It works! Miracle, US talking to Europe in Japan, totally unlike what my guide book said. It must predate 3G. We arrange meeting up sometime later. She knows an Irish pub not far from where I am. "OK, but God, how cheesy!", I text her. "Thou shalt not scorn our Lord Guinness!" she answers. So, we're meeting near Shinbashi at half past nine. Funny place for a drink.

The 'pub' turns out to be on the fifth floor of an office like building with some variation on a shopping arcade, dominated by posh clothing stores, on the ground floor. Bizarre. The lift is as large as a small car, an elderly

Japanese couple enter, dressed as if they're back from the Opera. Out into an office corridor, to the right fire equipment, to the left the pub entrance. A wooden front door, fake brick, fake windows, terraced house style, indoors, on the fifth floor. It's a huge hall. Mock pub paraphernalia. It looks like a more manicured version of a cheap big chain pub back in England. There are round tables, a few Chesterfield sofas, actually a lot of them, surely at least a dozen. The place is large, capacity several hundred I think, lamps with green glass shades on the table, dark wood, plastic wood maybe panelling on the distant walls. Some half height partitions, I knock, empty solid oak, must be stained plywood. It has an airport catering feel, with a surrealist touch. I can't find Tina, after a full wander round. A waitress comes, hands over menu, I order a beer. This is not very pub-like. The place is half full, of very well behaved characters. It must be the same people who frequent the shops downstairs during the day.

"Ah here you are!" says Tina. Short, mid-length dark hair, green eyes, pale skin, all American girl next door, I can imagine her out of college, just by discounting the morphing caused by childbearing and the advent of middle age, where everything gets a bit more squarish. Thankfully, she didn't fall into the proper massive widening and rounding that so often comes to Middle America with the onset of their thirties. "So how did you pick up this place," I ask, "it's, how should I say, interesting, but not my idea of your idea of quintessential Irish-ness." She comments about her Irish ancestry and that she's really only found that out as a suggestion of a colleague she met at the conference. She explains she's here for an intergovernmental meeting on international migration, trying to fight illegal immigrant jobs in quasi-slavery conditions and some such bad karma activities. Fancy subject, but at the faintest hint of my intention to go into the topic, she steadfastly reprimands me away from it with a definite "no shop talk today, I'm sick of it! Doing good is exhausting, and I assure you the proceedings are no more interesting than if it was a lawyer clusterfuck. See what I mean, they suggested this! Though in an exotic way it's likeable, isn't it?" I concur, and at that moment the incongruous waitress delivers our drinks.

"Thank God they're not making their own Guinness", she remarks sipping the real stuff. "That couldn't be worse than the real thing, I can't stand it anyway. My Newky Brown is also quite okay but I could be fooled, amazing to get that in Japan, and it's barely more expensive than it would be in London." She smiles, looking radiant. Touches her hair. "It's weird to see you here in Japan, you belong in Skype. You're a Skype entity", she says. I ask her if she wishes I was an algorithm. "They don't make algorithms that fucked up yet" she says. "Cheers", I smile back, "but enough about me, what about the new guy?" She replies that it's going strong really, she can't really believe it. He's a bit paranoid, "I even had to explain you were not dangerous, the accent

and stuff, you know.” I smile. “See online dating works – he was from online wasn't he? – well for others, and all that after you'd said it's all a joke and you're done with it. That said, great approach, when you think you're done with it but still go there, you're über-clever.” She replies, “Yeah whatever, we'll see, it's the free site you sent me on, so I'll want my money back if he fucks up with me.” I laugh. “How many kids have you got together now?” She replies five, and that they're really assorted. She's got two girls, he's got two boys and a girl, I inquire if they are matching ages, the boys are midway, a bit younger. I ask if they could still assemble, to which she replies “Shut the fuck up!” And she adds, “what about considering getting some of your own, would make your dating job easier, as you're spot on about the girls who are on last orders and will take anything, and you're better than average to boot!”

A group of exceedingly well behaved young things have sat at the next table. “Yes, it would certainly help, but I don't think I could be arsed. I don't have a need for being indispensable. You had pets before you had kids didn't you?” – she nods – “See, good training for kids, I think I'd starve plants or animals, plus it's quite a bit selfish, inflicting your bad DNA like that on innocent life forms.” Her phone rings. Pause, note that the clean kids on our left are matched by a group of parent like types, with a similar sense of dress, moderately good taste, jeans and plaid shirts, a few mid length skirts from what I can gather from a side look; muted blues, browns and greys, and muted tone variations thereof. “It was my sister, she wants some rice bowls that she says she can't find in the US.” I express my scepticism about the world's most powerful nation's inability to produce or import decent rice bowls, and whether Madame her Sister is acquainted with the Internet. “She's my sister, so she gets rice bowls, that's the way it works” she says. “See, I rest my case: family are too hard work” I retort.

“This reminds me, did I tell you about the weird broody date?” I ask. She says, can't recall me telling her. “So, it was a bit bizarre, theatre girl, her profile said 38 but it may have been a couple of years more, and a couple of years less in her photos, well whatever, fair enough, she didn't look sixty or anything. Once I saw a profile where the girl said 39 and looked 60 in the photo already. Some do wish. Anyway. It started with a little disappointment, a mature plain face, a bit triangular, not very likeable, but I don't need to bore you with the details, she was a bit plain generally but nothing outrageously unlikeable, and some promising boobs under a neck sweater, of a tendentiously garish dark pink, well, long story short;” – “yeah we don't fucking care about the colour of her sweater”, Tina interrupts – “I didn't fancy her particularly despite nothing wrong as such, just one of those where there's no chemistry. Fairly relaxed conversation, very inoffensive; she talked a lot, teacher, about her theatre company, holidays, the like. She got a bit

more intoxicated than me, she did down a lot of gin and tonic. Anyway, I still manage to take her in front of her tube stop and she smiles, she says nice night, she sent a lot of kiss-me vibes, and by that time I had grown to like her a bit so we did kiss. She asked if I lived nearby, didn't I, and here we go. Then she insisted we have another drink, well, she had another drink, and started saying how nice I was blah blah, come into me, come into me, at one point we ended up in cowgirl position and actually had to move my cock away, take a break and put a condom on. It's unusual, normally the girl takes the initiative on this, strange inversion. She looked at me, she had a sad look, sort of turned me off, and then she had to blow it back to life – unusually competent at that she was – but it felt weird, like a disappointment.” Tina interjects, “Yeah. Hm. Whatever, you can be silly when you're drunk, but yeah you could also be right. Did she talk babies at all?” I answer that not explicitly, though after we were done she asked for another drink she got to some sort of delirium that I would fit well with her wardrobe and her bed, described her place in photographic detail on how I'd be a perfect match for it etc. Then she fell asleep. We woke up when her phone alarm rang and she had to rush out, was into some hungover agitation, but it felt as if we were strangers. She disappeared in the toilet, then I barely heard a “have to run” from the corridor and she was gone. Tina agrees it's a bit weird, but I might still be making up the broody story, before asking what happened next. I tell her that nope, I left it at that and didn't hear from her anymore. She removed her online dating account from the site the next day. “Whatever, let's have another beer!” concludes Tina, wisely.

“Don't you find this city ugly?”, she asks as we start our third pints. I comment that yes it's not super pretty, lots of overhead wire and low attention to detail, but in a chaotic disorganised way, and there's always a funky Love Hotel which can pop up unexpectedly at any turn. She has got a hotel room with a window that has a better view than a party wall, I wonder if she's thus ruining her institution with a premium package. She doesn't think so, the street is noisy and not particularly pretty, and the signs opposite are all written in Foreign. I try to convince her of the merits of the neon landscape, to which she argues that it doesn't help when it's rainy, as it has been since she arrived – arguably two days ago I interject – but she insists it must be rainy all the time. “This city asks for rain, it would probably make everyone funny if it were sunny.” I can only admit defeat, “nowhere is gonna beat Phoenix on that one!”

“Oh, we were talking about broodiness earlier, this reminds me, I saw some pretty weird thing online the other day. I joined some hooking up paysite for a while, which is totally useless for hooking up...” “How so?” she interrupts. “Well, basically there are no girls, I had like 200 women matches, among about 10,000 men in the same demographic, London and age range, and

actually the women were probably 20 once you removed the call girls, the trannies, the lesbo girls, and the bait women from couples who are looking for the third leg of a threesome; and of the 20 remaining there's mostly relatively ugly fat girls who might indeed have trouble to get quality lay offline. Even those probably get a wide choice so even if you're desperate it's not a given you can pull one of those." She suggests I should have tried being the third leg in a threesome. I continue, "Yeah, hm, maybe some day; anyway that wasn't my broody point if I may be pedantic, I stalked the forums there while I was at it. It's understandably quite gross though there were some interesting stories. One of those, more on the gross side it has to be said, was some alleged girl who was basically asking for a sperm donor, I think she explained her reason, being lesbian, or whatever, but basically here she was, saying she wanted a kid and had no man so would anyone fuck her just for the purpose of impregnating her. Not much detail, may have been a wind up who knows, but that triggered a flood of replies, something like a hundred guys saying 'cool, I'm keen on that, here's my number' so that they get a shag. I found that a slightly dilettante attitude to fatherhood. I can't fathom if they get a buzz out of a mere shag or the idea of having unseen progeny." Tina looks unusually pensive for a second. "Maybe some of them hoped to keep in touch and get a family through the backdoor", she pauses further, "nah, I think not, they want to warm up their willy and that's all. It has to be consistent with usual male sophistication. You guys do think with your dick most of the time don't you? The second brain I call it." I reply, "Or is it our first?" She concurs I'm likely right.

She then tells me about the pregnant woman she once had next to her on a flight, she hadn't thought you could fly that close to delivery. "No, she wasn't just fat" she says before I have the opportunity to even think about any such comment. "Stop thinking ahead of me, or I'll have no more to say", she smirks. I say that she will always have some more to say, unless she's really ill, which sends me on a digression about repatriation insurance, that you can get a guaranteed private jet back home for medical or other emergencies, it's on top of medical insurance, so covers cases that are not life and death, e.g. you're on a continent with half decent hospitals and could get treated there; one of my colleagues has one of these. It's not even that expensive. And no, I didn't get one, it is still above my pay grade. I submit if you're broken enough to be stuck in hospital it doesn't matter that much where it is, apart from the inconvenience of getting visitors in and the like. "I don't particularly want to die in fucking Japan", she says and moves on to describe the death of her own father, that she had always avoided talking about, she had mentioned him only a few times in the past, quickly changing the subject, although it hadn't quite registered with me. He had committed suicide, by hanging, and it was she who discovered the body when coming back from school. It felt totally unexplainable, she had fairly fond memories of him, he was a good

dad, always taking care of her, reading her bedside stories, helping with the school work, unlike her mother who was much more distant. She was 8 and he was 39. It was a total shock. Her mother became even more distant after that. And to this day she doesn't see that much of her, and it's always very businesslike. The lack of explanation is such a burden, and it took her until her twenties when she saw someone and talked at length about it. Also Baby Daddy was good with that, it went pear shaped some time later, but they had some good time for a while. She looks sad and shaken. I hold her hand, briefly. She quickly regains control and moves onto the two new purses – “silly American word” I comment, “fuck the Brits”, she counters – she has acquired at the mall opposite the convention centre. I admire the good business sense of placing a mall opposite conventioning Americans in a challenging-to-navigate city.

As the evening progressed, we've physically slid closer to each other, and we're now nooked in, as if space was at a premium. Our shoulders touch, our gazes are locked, our heads a few inches from each other. I break the stare, look down briefly at her mouth, and back up, and again; and, then, make the short move until our lips touch, she resists, moves her head back, but her mouth remains half offered; the kiss lasts a second, and another, it holds, pauses, and releases, without a bang. She looks at me puzzled, for a second, amused the next, pausing, for a moment, before saying “Are you on something?” I answer that no, apart from the booze, and even with that I'm maintaining my standing, “but you owed me some making out, didn't you?” We both laugh. Incident closed.

The crowd in this vast establishment is thinning down, and we decide it's time to go. I have a subway plan, she wants a taxi. We start with the lift. A trio of white guys come in behind us. She asks them if they know if there are taxi ranks nearby. They reply with an “are you American?” in a West Country accent. We get out of the lift, “you bet!”, they look a bit like builder types, thick checkered shirts, jeans, number two hair. I'm not interested in getting to know drunk Brits in Tokyo. The two thinner ones, red and white shirts, are giggling inoffensively, but a stockier one, a short inch taller than Tina, and probably a couple of years younger, seems quite keen on her. He starts saying how he loves America. “Phoenix is south of New York, isn't it?” She's amused enough to play with him while I ponder how we'll get out of this. No taxi on the horizon, it's a relatively wide street but with little traffic, I think there's hope round the corner, a couple of hundred yards away, but how do I unclog her from these guys; well, *this* guy. He gets quite close, deluge of compliments, it feels so awkward. I get close to her and put my arm round her waist, “shall we go now, we're tired, aren't we?” He steps back, briefly, and then asks, “are you guys related?” which I neg, “are you gay?”, to which I answer, “not yet!” He doesn't seem to know what to make of that, and we

cheer them and depart.

“Bit annoying those, no?” I ask, she replies they were just good fun, she's seen much worse, for drunken louts they were exceedingly well behaved, “and thanks for cock-stopping, silly boy!” They might have a chance in accountancy. Her friend Tracy's boyfriend is an accountant, and he drinks a lot more. He nearly killed their child. “Taxi!” she shouts. We hug. She disappears in the car, and it drives away soon losing itself in the distance on the faintly lit wide avenue.

Maybe I should have taken that taxi too, I think, as I walk, imprecisely, towards the subway stop.

Dance with me

Kyoto. 10am. It's cold, not viciously so, but not really pleasant either. I left Tokyo a few days ago for a Shinkansen tour of the provinces. I'm joining a walking tour that I've found earlier this morning on a hotel flyer. The meeting point is in front of some temple compound. It's further away than I thought and I'm late. Four people are ready to go, the guide, an almost cute late twenties girl – not easy to tell the age, or the cuteness sometimes, with Asians – and three middle aged Japanese ladies who apparently came as a set. And someone else, who's just left and rushed to buy something or other from the corner shop opposite on the avenue, a busy thoroughfare. Maybe she'll be cut off forever.

It turns out the older Japanese women are indeed together, and locals who want to become tourist guides... mid-life crisis career change? We won't know. And why not. They are quite eager to exercise their English with the Gaijin. My fellow westerner returns from the shop. An American woman in her early thirties, probably, she looks so much the part that verification by accent is barely necessary. She might have material under the pullover. That's a tactical problem with winter, data collection is a tougher problem. Tight jeans however, so we are in a better position here. She has almost nice legs, not skinny, she's the good kind of curvy. It's not a bad shape, overall. She's got the potential to get worse in five/ten years or if she gets married and reproduces. American women have awesome potential for body change, with the ability to turn from Baywatch babes into vast ball-shaped lumps in a short few years. Marry early, girls; marry often, boys. Let's not get lost on feet, of no memorable character, and let's aim straight for the face. She's not stunning, quite; yet, I like her, somehow, and it's still only ten past ten in the morning with no favourable lighting or moderating substance to fuzzy the reading.

We move along with the sightseeing. Temples. Buddhist and Shinto share grounds. You can order a serving of future goodness for a few pennies. No money back guarantee but cheap. Seems fairly lightweight and jolly as religions go. Pity they didn't do, and may still not quite do, their nationalism like they do their religion. The girl and I stay within regulatory distance. It's difficult to flirt sober at that time of the morning. We end up at some other

temple on a hill. On the way, we stop to sample some cookies at a tourist store – amateur product placement, so sweet, but it doesn't quite work, no-one buys anything. Pretty small streets on a hillside are next, unusual as not many Japanese streets are pretty or on a hillside. We're told the story about the use of Shinto shrines to prevent street urination, the details of which escape me. We end higher up, at the edge of the town before the hillside forest starts, then just another temple complex, with a nice view of the city. Kyoto tower is a bit of an eyesore and probably universally considered so. I still like it somehow, a bit of misplaced Eastern block charm perhaps. Ellen is from Indianapolis. We've reached small talk.

As the walk ends, we say goodbye to the tour guide and apprentices, and try to find our way downhill. I stop to take my bearings. "Fancy a coffee?" I ask, successfully taking a tight slot before she'd have departed, and after being some distance away from the middle aged Japanese women who looked eager for some more English practice. I perhaps shouldn't have dismissed them so off handedly, after all they're not that much older than I am, and probably not as asexual as I perceive them to be. Indianapolis Girl is nicely keen on her coffee, and I get to know a bit more about her. She's not that much of a redneck after all. She did an MBA in Lisbon. It's nearly 1pm and she's cute enough to keep all my misgivings about people who do MBAs to myself. We stroll along, get a free umbrella from the coffee store owner. She worked for Volvo after the MBA, travelled to foreign sites. She's now back to her home town, working for Dad's company. Ouch, family business, MBA. No boyfriend in the story so far though, she bought a flat, quips about the difficulties of the small town dating scene. We keep on touring together, end up in some comics museum in the town centre. All very pleasant, it's early afternoon when she departs for some shopping and stuff, but asks what I'm doing tonight. Perfect! We have a break and can resume proceeding at a more auspicious time. Might she even be after something? Whatever. It'd be nice if such encounters happened more often.

8pm, we meet in one of the small Irish pubs ubiquitous in big Japanese cities. In a very Japanese way, it's upstairs on the first floor of an office block. So odd to take a lift to go to a bar. She's wearing a tighter fitting black top. Really nice tits after all, delivering on the morning's teaser packaging. It could always be a very good bra, I muse. I was late of course and she complains about her neighbours' chat, whom she was listening in while waiting for me – a group of American professor types, in their forties. She doesn't get into details, I speculate with myself that she thinks they were being sexist pigs probably talking about fresh student meat. Darling, every man is a sexist pig. And every woman, even worse; but let's keep that for another day. She steers the conversation away, and I'm deprived of any hindsight about the professors' adventures. Maybe the whole thing had

nothing to do with piggery after all; we may have been on some completely different trip. I've grown to appreciate misunderstandings. Anyway, back to our drinks, and the main focus of my efforts for this evening: pretend I'm not staring at her tits. I'm so grateful she hasn't got an open cleavage.

We leave the upstairs Irish pub, go to the other side of the little river, to a delightful bar alley with neons galore. That's why Japan should be done in winter, it's clearly handsomer at night. The small places are a bit touristy; and empty. It's midweek. The first few candidates are vetoed by regal Ellen. We end up in some empty bar, which doesn't seem different, but is good enough to sit down. Emptiness is a bit freaky, and she decides to leave. All those were downstairs but it is always difficult to judge a Japanese watering hole from the outside. It's been a nice stroll nonetheless. A sign to an upstairs bar complete with a photo of the inside, 'with music', looks alluring. We attempt that. It is much nicer. Good catch, I'm glad she was being picky after all. It's the size of a small living room, with a handful of other customers. Good vibe. A corner stage stands empty, a guitar decorates the wall. So much for the music but the barman is playing fairly agreeable stuff. He looks in his fifties probably, ageing well, doesn't talk much, and a very approximate English, but pleasant character altogether. "Great line of work to be in" I comment.

We get a corner table, with padded wall seats. But with a kind of armrest-side table built into the corner, making logistics difficult. Talk flows nicely. She's settling down, with big plans for Dad's business. Her aim in life is getting comfortably wealthy and financially independent in a few years. Why not, but it's a bit boring. So is being stuck in Indianapolis after having seen the world. She's bought a house, more settling down. And after that? I try to explain to her that she'll get bored, that actually financial independence is not as exciting as it's meant to be. What do you do afterwards? She doesn't agree. But I like disagreeing with her. I try to order some sake, but they don't have any. Some other Japanese spirit will do. I think they're into foreign drinks in this bar. She stays on beer. She's sitting a bit upright, like her life plan. But not quite uptight, she seems in between being relaxed and restrained – all very good for her posture. Somehow she could be a major pain in real life without a little bit of reframing, but tonight I really like her. About midnight, I touch her, despite the corner furniture. She pushes my arm back, gently but firmly.

We talk about Sweden. She worked there less than a year, but thinks the Swedes are impossible to live with. Social circles are tightly knit, even the foreigners who learn the language barely have a chance to integrate into local society. I'm sceptical but what do I know. She didn't get chatted up once while she was there, which she found weird, and concludes that it's the

women doing the first step, which I doubt, it might be more that nothing happens until everybody gets drunk enough at private parties. Scandinavian feminism has gone funny ways, all right; but then you were complaining about our friendly American expat professors earlier, I tell her! Maybe I should rush to Stockholm's or Gothenburg's clubs to see if it's indeed the girls doing all the work. She says that in Lisbon the guys were all over her, stereotypes do sometimes function. She met the girl she's staying with in Tokyo during the MBA there. We talk about what they did at the weekend. Apparently apologetically, she mentions a call to her boyfriend, safely stowed away in Indianapolis. I'm a bit miffed, we've met this morning, and even accounting for the afternoon break, it's now 1am, why did it take her that long to introduce the boyfriend? On a first date, which this arguably isn't, conventions sometimes push you to obliterate any trace of relationship from your life story, but it takes some effort. It is rather bizarre she could manage all day on an I, I, I mode without ever a collegial we intruding.

We don't hear more of the boyfriend, perhaps he has little more than the ability to operate a telephone once a week. It could be. I ponder. She does sound like the kind of woman who may need a boyfriend in the same way you need a fridge. Not because she couldn't live on her own, or make do with canned food, she's clearly fully independent, but because of social pressure that you must have a boyfriend in the same way as you must have a fridge or a car; so as to be pushed into settling for the barely adequate. I can't really tell if she was flirting properly, earlier. It looks so, but was subtle enough if so to be quite convincingly deniable, and my own invention. But I shouldn't be complaining, a regular girl with a functional boyfriend stored away would only talk about him which would have made for a much less exciting evening.

We go back to Scandinavia, now arguing over whether Swedish is a tonal language. She's positive it's not. She's done some vague course, but then I think I know linguistics a bit. The ignorant type, yes, but I'm positive that Swedish is tonal. The other clients have left the bar. It's been nice, even if she won't kiss. Silly girl. We leave. Our respective hotels are in the same direction, so we take the same taxi, explain the uniformed (and apparently very uptight) driver that we go to two different hotels. He doesn't understand it so we end up in front of her hotel. I decide to walk from there, mine is just a short mile away and I like 3am city walks. Good bye on the steps of the hotel. She makes a quick but strange face I can't read. I want to tell her "hope you'll regret it", but settle for a parting "you're too good!" I'm too reasonable.

I'm back to my formica business hotel, looking up Swedish tonality online. It's semi tonal says the Internet. We're both right. Text her. She doesn't text back – will I ever learn? We should have fucked.

Next morning. I'm sitting on the Shinkansen fast train. It's slick and comfy, not crowded, not empty, just the right level of busyness for the touring trainspotter. Maybe they should just run them in a loop, all that tourism thing is a hassle. I realise I've forgotten my Japan by Rail guidebook on a bench in Kyoto station. Irritating. Well, not. It wasn't a very good guide book. Quite heavy, with lots of pages wasted on places I won't go to. And not well written. All essentials were in there, but somehow it was not quite geeky enough for a proper railhead, and the tourist bit seemed convoluted. Obviously, the lone – predictably – author worked quite hard on it but the tourism sections are bland, just doing the sights without much soul, without a sense of place, and it looks like the guy spent a year going to bed at 9pm given the lack of nightlife coverage. From the blurb he's an Oxbridge guy in his late twenties. Reads like he needs a girlfriend; or a more interesting one if he's got one. Maybe he is Ellen's. No, hers must be worse actually, at least this guy went all the way to Japan and wrote 600 pages on it, if not very good ones.

I can't help thinking of her. I'm actually upset it didn't go somewhere. It is so retarded. It was fun, much better than just stalking nothingness around town. I reflect whether I should have played it as a two day game, she asked several times, before I had become so utterly obvious in the evening, what I was doing the following day. She was going to some nearby town with sights on her own, while I'm going to Nagasaki. But I could have changed plans. Maybe I'd have looked irresistible after a day, girls need time. Though sometimes they need three years. On the liabilities side, I probably would have ended up more frustrated in case she had retained the inflexibility of a convent girl.

I don't want to be grumpy because of her, I tell myself. I check my phone to see if she doesn't text. And again. And again. Idiot, she won't. I try to forget, watching the landscape, fast sliding past on the window side, the odd cute Japanese – I'm pleasantly the only white guy in this world – passing by on the alley side. The on-board service girls aren't half bad to look at, wonder if they choose them on looks, it's a premium train after all.

Hamlet

I enter one of these rare gems of a pub, in south Islington, that successfully mix trendy students, media mums, middle aged council estate workers and elderly drinkers who seem to have sat at that particular table or on that precise stool since Thatcher was still in power. Henry and Elisa, sitting at a corner table by the loo, pints already half empty, seem engrossed in a passionate conversation, they look like they might be discussing something so earth shattering that we might get an earthquake warning before the pints get liquidated.

I interrupt, "hello," and they stop in their track. Before becoming the centre of attention I have to ask what they were talking about. "Henry is a very good bloke, except for one thing. He hates cats, and, adding insult to injury, not because he's allergic to them", declares Elisa. "Why then?" I ask. "Just lifestyle. Lazy bastards. Spoiled brats. They make themselves interesting; then they enslave their owners. Dogs are not going to con you that way. They're proper loyal." With revived passion Elisa starts an unassailable defence of the feline condition, with which I can only concur.

"So. Japan, tell us all about it! Did you bring back a geisha in your luggage?" starts Henry. I brief them on my impressions, how Tokyo differs from the provinces, and how all gently agreeable it was. The low lying houses are never built up the mountains. I show them my collection of Love Hotel pictures on the phone, "they look better full size, actually, these are mostly crap pictures." Elisa is upset that I didn't actually try a Love Hotel. I explain that if you go through any red light district's main street, and it's easy enough from a random walk between the more obvious sightseeing sites, as a lone bloke, you do get some hard sales pitch sooner or later. One insisted that I could check the inventory before deciding or not, but it wasn't enough to tempt me. I also mention that I got scammed, some years ago in Riga, into paying for overpriced drinks and no sex, and that has turned me off the offline sex industry altogether so far. "Pity," says Elisa, "most sex workers are probably just trying to earn an honest living and a few bad apples are putting the profession into disrepute." "Russians!", sighs Henry. "Where they even Russian?" asks Elisa. "Yes, indeed, as far as I could tell." I point out that I also haven't figured out the limit between the talk and consumption variants

of sex encounters that seems so essential to the Japanese scene, and I'd probably be a bit miffed if I ended up spending an hour of broken English chat at naked action rates.

“Wait a minute! You haven't explained the scam with the Russians”, asks Elisa. “He told me that story twice already”, remarks Henry, looking at his empty glass. “You only realised the following day you had already heard it, so we're both old fogeys” I tell him. Elisa steers the conversation to the main track, looking at her half full pint and noting that Henry drinks faster, so I tell my Baltic tale. I was just off the plane, had left my luggage at the hotel, looking for something to eat late in the evening. It was a Monday evening, there were few people on the streets. Two student type cuties in going out outfits, though not as such whorish outrageous, ran to me and asked where I'm from, got a snack with me, and then invited me to go to a bar. I couldn't believe my luck. Well, actually, that's the problem, I could believe my luck. They took me round the corner to a bar, past an appealing legit bar, to which I pointed and which they dismissed, down a short dead end street. Entering their bar, there was a podium on the left and just two or three clients, all male, and two or three staff, all female. From the threshold on, I understood it was a strip club, but thought what the hell I'm on holiday and can spend a bit on overpriced drinks. The girls feigned surprise at the stripper on the podium, but it was very clear they didn't go to acting school. Then they took me to the furthest table in a dimly lit corner. I ordered a gin and tonic. They ordered a glass of champagne each. I still thought at that moment that maybe they were interested in me, or at least one of them. I was tired, but that's indeed totally retarded. Thankfully I started smelling a rat when we started drinking, while making smalltalk with the girls in seriously broken English. I tried to look at the menu on the table but the prices were printed in red, and the lighting was tame and red so as to make them indecipherable... As I had barely finished my drink, the waitress rushed to take the next order, and I told her that I wasn't paying for any more drinks for the girls. This took her smile away. She started looking borderline angry. She argued it's not what a gentleman does. I paused, and finally got to my senses. I got up, told her I was going to pay for what we had consumed and would leave. I moved towards the bar where there was some sort of supervisor girl, barely older than the bar staff. A typical Russian-looking middle aged security type, short grey hair, Soviet sense of fashion, was sitting near the entrance, obviously bored. I asked for my bill, which turned out to be circa 150 quid. My own drink, at a tenner, was merely slightly overpriced, and within the range I expected: it was all loaded on the girls' glasses of champagne, the magic drink. I looped over the argument on gentlemanly behaviour with the supervisor, that went nowhere. I suggested she called the police then, to which she replied that the girls were underage, so I shouldn't have brought them there. I dismissed that idea as ridiculous. The girls just stood nearby,

looking politely upset, it must be bad for business to bring problem customers. And then they just left. Not that I was that much of a problem, just arguing a bit, then accepting defeat and trying to haggle a discount, I got it down to 120 and then the supervisor, who wasn't unsexy to boot, motioned in the security guard. He just stood up, I said "OK!" He sat back down. He was still bored. I paid and went, and made mental plans on my way to the hotel of coming the next day with a flame-thrower to get my 120 quid back. "Hilarious!" says Elisa, "and you saved a bundle by being turned off the sex industry from then on. Did you get the flame-thrower?" I reply that I did quieten down obviously, but how funny it is that a scam is instinctively so much more irritating than losing the same nominal amount to mere ineptitude, I've surely lost more than that on buying dud stuff or missing a plane, but it's so much more acceptable when it's self inflicted.

Henry chimes in, "it is a neat tale, a bit less civilised than the proceedings in the *Memoirs of a Geisha*." Elisa and Henry then proceed to discuss the literary merit of a book I have, inexcusably, not read. And how the narrative rhythm was an intense parallel for the girl's life, as it develops in sophistication as she ages, while the vocabulary extends as her horizon narrows. Elisa contends that it's a metaphor for life in general, the explicit restricted horizon of the *Geisha*, nothing beyond Gion and its codes, even when she moves to run a Gion outpost in New York. Henry argues that she's free then, that the continental shift is a symbolic switch from being chosen to choosing to be, whatever life offers, there's freedom within limits. "You're doing again the debate between Augustine and Pelagius", launches Elisa. "Pelagius who?" says Henry, reassuring me that I may, after all, not be the only ignoramus at this table. Elisa admits to having recently prepared a lecture on late antiquity theology. At that point, we all agree we need refills.

"We had a little end of project party at work last week, where most colleagues brought their spouse, present or future, and one of them has a wife who is a space debris specialist at the university of Southampton" says Henry. I demand details. He explains that it's old satellites and bits and pieces of old satellites, or when an astronaut on the space shuttle lets go of a spanner and it remains in orbit, that they track to avoid future incidents, or perhaps study some physics but he's not sure he got that aspect quite right, and that they have a database of all these things she works on. "Do they know where that orange woolly hat I lost last year is?" asks Elisa. I remark I can quite see her in a latex outfit in the International Space Station, but that orange is a bit disgraceful, unless you go to a scat party perhaps, orange and brown always go well together. She goes on that it's a marginally useful job, that space spanner tracking thing, almost like graduate literature. "But what do you think the really useful jobs are?" asks Henry. She suggests cancer research or treatment, for instance. Henry pauses and says, "yeah, well, it's

useful, you can get people with boring lives to have a few more years of boring life.” I vehemently interject that you do it for the 1% of cancer survivors who go on to do great things, like having a latex orgy in the International Space Station. He concedes that some may, “but anyway is it that much better there than in a seedy basement in Soho?” Elisa is adamant that weightlessness is not available anywhere in London town.

The students at the next table are arguing about the misdemeanours of an acquaintance, who possibly cheated on their friend. “She couldn't possibly not know she'd hurt him, I think she's just evil” says the one with too big specs. I get confused as Henry and Elisa are now furiously agreeing about the sorry state of British education. “Was it better when you guys were at school?” I mischievously question. “You won't get me on that one, that's another from Augustine, he was already complaining that old farts always embellished their past, that said there was a lot of rota where I was.” Henry points out, “She's too modest to say she got excluded from sixth form at 17.” I ask, “Did you shit on the teacher or something?” She smiles, and remarks that it was mundane, just some regular humping during a school outing.

“There's always some killjoys around. Actually that's a problem now at work, my department head is just an idiot, which really makes work barely bearable. I love the job and the students but the bureaucracy and direction is so tiresome. You can't get anything slightly out of line going, and the whole curriculum is not even classically good, it's like conservatism wherever it doesn't matter. And the cow runs the thing as her little personal empire, bickering about the faintest little meaningless thing.” I remark that it goes well with the stereotype of academic disputes' viciousness being inversely proportional to the importance of the matter, in a life or death kind of way. Elisa sighs. Henry looks pensive, sips from his beer, and suggests to Elisa that, if her boss is sufficiently stupidly authoritarian she should at an appropriate opportunity stick in the phrase “So you joined academia because you failed the fitness test for the Waffen SS?” He came up with that during a debate with distant cousins. He almost used it but had to restrain himself due to excess potency, and Godwin law breakage, for the trivial matter at hand. Elisa laughs hard enough to disturb our kiddy neighbours.

“Talking about Godwin and stuff, have I told you guys about my Jewish dating incident?” she asks. We simultaneously shake our heads. Elisa starts, “It was hilarious. So I was to go on a date with a guy from Safety Pin, you know, the fetish site; and we were to meet in that pub, the Chicken and Egg, off Covent Garden.” Henry remarks that it's a great place for a date. “Precisely!”, Elisa continues, “so I'm due to meet this guy and I've actually only seen a few body pictures of him in fetish outfits, and one fuzzy face behind a haze of smoke, I assumed he didn't want to be recognisable, and

that's okay on the scene. Anyway, I had thought he would recognise me, but still I got into the pub, looking around, a bit frantically, like I'm looking for a date I've never met really. And there's this guy sitting on a table to the left of the entrance, wearing pretty mainstream clothing, I think a light green polo and jeans, but you've got plenty of people with a normal day life, and he matched the figure broadly, so, he goes asking if I am... without finishing his sentence as I cut him off and, say, like, yes that's me. And I sit down, and then we go into smalltalk, you know pretty standard fare, and we hadn't discussed much online anyway, so what you do, what have you done today, then got into a debate of London politics, he says that Boris Johnson has redeeming qualities, and I say no, and the chat bounces nicely. And then we must have been one hour in and we discuss stores and I ask where he bought his outfit. And he describes Marks and Spencer. I can't believe they're selling latex. And then he says it's a cotton shirt, he thought I was joking. And then I try to explain I'm talking about his outfit online, all those pics, from his club gear, and then he says he's wearing the same green polo on his profile picture. And I say no. And he thinks I'm joking. And I say no, he's not wearing a polo, on Safety Pin. And then, bingo, he understands, and asks if Safety Pin is a website?"

"So he was having a date with someone looking like you from another website?" asks Henry. "Exactly", Elisa replies, "some niche Jewish dating site I've forgotten the name of. And his date had no picture on her profile and was supposed to recognise him, and that's what I looked like when I arrived." I emit some doubt on the veracity of the story, but Elisa, swears, "you couldn't make it up, could you?" Henry wants to know more, if they will be meeting again. Well they had another drink and parted good friends. She explains he was a bit taken aback at being parachuted into a fetish date, and remarked on Elisa's uncanny civilian normality. The mystery of whether another couple happily formed on the same night with their opposite numbers remains unsolved. They couldn't find any likely contender in the rest of the pub. Henry opines that the other guys had gone home on their own independently, a double mismatch being considerably less likely. "So, you've still not told us if you're meeting him again?" insists Henry. "Nope, I'm not that into green polos, and anyway I don't have a way to contact him, I'm not on his site and he's not on mine, and we didn't swap numbers!"

Synchronicity

It took three weeks to get back up to speed with the online dating after the Japanese interlude. Of the lone prospects on the to-be-pursued-further list from before the trip, one had left the site and the other stopped replying. So it was back to square one. Here is an American anthropologist doing her Ph.D in Oxford. A bit on the young side, 27, but whatever if she wants to see me, I'm not going to be the one complaining. Her pictures are a bit difficult to decipher, body shot a bit in the distance and nice smile on the one face shot but difficult to say how it will turn out in the flesh. She's travelling all the way from Oxford, it turns out she's based there despite having put London in her profile – there's enough people here for me not to need to do long distance fishing, which makes more sense for those living in the countryside who are all facing a paucity of suitable candidates. But Oxford is not that small, and there should be a student or graduate crowd. Strange. The last train back to Oxford is quite early compared to our 8pm start, I wonder whether she has got a plan B, a further residence in London, great certainty on the outcome, or expectations so low that she thinks it unlikely I will be bearable for more than 2 hours. We'll see.

I enter the bar, five minutes late. Look at the waitress, “Hi”, a joyful voice comes from the left side. Here she is. Well, well. OK. It is one of those slight disappointments; she's okay, actually pretty much like her picture, sitting on the fence between attractiveness and lack thereof. As I sit down and order my drink, I have second thoughts and start finding there's some subtle goodness surfacing here. And this impression gets reinforced as the beer flows through the biographical details, which are not without interest. She was born in Wisconsin, studied in Boston, and is now doing the Ph.D in Oxford. “Like Bill Clinton, sort of?” I ask. “Almost, but I have inhaled”, she says. I smile. “But you will pretend otherwise when you try for the Presidency? Or, maybe, do you think that by then the morals will have liberalised enough?” She answers that likely not, “our rednecks are pretty stuck in their ways and good at transmitting it to their kids, and throughout history societal mores of the time seem to swing like a pendulum, sometimes progressing but it usually seems like you do three steps forwards and two back, when not regressing altogether.”

The evening proceeds agreeably. Another round goes by, almost furtively. We talk about music, I get on about that IDM artist who changes his name all the time, to which she responds “I just call him Sasha.” She's not even being boastful about it. She just happens to know him. Boston connection. “Small place eh?”, I ask, and immediately add, “plus you're one social animal aren't you, so you would even know everyone worth knowing in a mid-size town, wouldn't you?” She consents and goes on a tangent about coincidence and how they're not that unlikely when you do the probability calculations – she may be an anthropologist, but a previous boyfriend was doing game theory. I inquire if she chooses boyfriends by subject so that they complement her field of study. “Not purposefully, but on a subconscious level it may be so.”

Despite all these academic achievements, we've not even been talking much at all about anthropology so I don't even have to feign not being ignorant. I am also saved from literature, of which I know little more, by her passion for the cheesiest fantasy, which she finds so soothing through its “delectable crapitude.” I felicitate her on such a choice use of words and commit to steal it for reuse somewhere else, and insist I'll do my best without attribution. “Not even a bit of attrition?” she pleads. I stand my ground, unwaveringly. Then I look at her, intently; bend – the table is larger than I'd like – and kiss her.

She skipped the regulatory resistance stage and after round one is done, she smiles contentedly and extends her hand over the salt flats this table puts between us. She seems quite satisfied. Time flows, patiently. She explains that she's got an annoying ex in Oxford, who's on the site, hence her looking in London. I suggest blocking or such a measure might work, it's a pity to close down a whole town because of one dick. “Many things in the world go wrong because of the one or other dick being in the way of everybody”, she says. I like her.

It's relaxed, she seems quite content, animated, excited enough that I don't have to make any conversation effort – how pleasant, it can get stalling sometimes. With her it just flows. Then most other patrons depart, it's clearly now past her last train. If it were only always that simple. She's describing an exhibition she's been to with treehouses made of scrap metal, “of the kind where you're not sure it's art or not?”, she corrects that you can usually tell if something is art or not but the tricky bit is to get whether it's crap art or not. “Don't they distribute leaflets at the entrance to deal with that question?” I suggest. She smiles. In that case it was quite pretty, she would consider it as garden furniture. I say I may have trouble liking the junk yard style I imagine this to be. No, the guy is Japanese, she responds, it was quite clean and precise, and all painted a matt pastel lilac, with grey accents, actually. “It didn't look DIY at all”, she adds. OK then, “Slick production values, then?”

Yes, she says it must be terribly hard work. I'm exhausted at the mere idea. We kiss again, I remark it's getting chilly, and suggest we go home, "Yeah, let's go."

It's a short walk from the pub I picked. She notes how convenient that is. Past the entrance hall, she mocks the CCTV screen. "Is there a gnome in the basement checking that?", she asks. I suggest if they put it on the web it could occupy some pensioners. Offered stairs or lift, she's picked the stairs. Bit a pity she's not quite as fit as her energy levels would warrant, I think as I follow her bottom up. I have to catch my breath as I look for my keys.

Once in, I lock the door. She's already sitting on the bed. I sit next to her. We kiss, she breaks the kiss to take her shirt off. Another of those quick ones, I think. I've even forgotten to put the auto-DJ on. I fix that, she looks at my blue haired plastic troll, and asks where it's from. It's from Arizona Tina. I explain a friend of mine thinks I'm a troll and thus trolled me up with one.

She lets me take off her bra, and trousers. I've got my bedside table lamp on. Think it might be better to switch it off. God is vicious sometimes, inflicting padding on some women on some overexposed surfaces. She's clearly one of those who looks better with the lights off. But it would break the flow, so the lights stay on. Thankfully she's quite enthusiastic and we both get engrossed in the experience to forget our failings. No idea how much she fancies me, after all it may be just my sense of humour or my supreme intellect, or conversely, she may just be into my shape, who knows. I reach her pussy, panties still on, she motions to take them off, I'm in the way, but her panties are not, she pushes them to the side, lick, moan, and repeat. She likes it, it seems. I take a break, she uses it to take any remaining item of clothing off, and goes down on me. That's cool. Slightly out of sync, but good.

"You got some condoms? Mine are somewhere deep in my bag. Where did I put it? Got some lube as well, from the uni's family planning people, though I don't think we'll need it after all" she says, as I grab one from behind the mattress, put it on, and she finishes the movement I had previously started, ending up in doggy position, offering her backside. I slide in. No lube needed indeed, taxpayer monies are secure.

We're back face to face, sitting on the bed, in a long deep kiss after a break from the pumping. I finally manage to switch the table lamp off as the auto-DJ starts some unexpectedly sweet ambient techno. I go back down on her, she back down on me, kiss. Kiss some more. I eat her tits, she's on her back. I can't be bothered to put another condom on so I just sit astride her, on top of her stomach, wanking my cock against her boobs, moving to get the lick. I use my left hand, behind my back, for massaging her clit. I'm almost there. I

wonder if we should go back to some regular penetration, but want to come to her face as well, so perversely tempting. She moans. Not sure she's ready for that. She moves in synch with the rhythm of my hand, two fingers in her pussy, tentatively massaging her clit with the palm; and then she plaintively asks, in a low voice, "come with me!" I think, novel idea, I say "you sure? it only works in the movies", she just moans further "come with me!" OK, let's try, I'm not far, a couple of strokes, one hand still on my cock and the other in her pussy. First shot is almost a full hit on her face, well the left side of it, but some flies past, outside the bed, on some discarded clothes, she groans and shakes. Tremors, groans, ancillary liquid gets all over her breasts and shoulder. I'm done, she groans, shakes one more time. As I finally look down, she's smiling. "You did?" – you never know for sure – she nods, with a contented exhausted smile.

I catch my breath before offering to clean up the mess, and apologising for it. She laughs. She gets up towards the bathroom, my bed is low, ideal vantage point for a backside cellulite view; I can't help thinking it's a bit early at 27, as she disappears.

I eventually switch off the auto-DJ, the remaining light, and we cuddle gently. She's quickly snoring. I'm not really sleepy. I'd rather snore than think myself, but can't help. Funny thing, best sex of the year so far and yet strangely bitter. This is probably not going anywhere, she's cool but I don't fancy her in a relationship kind of way, I fear, or I delude myself into thinking I could go out with someone I fancy in a relationship kind of way. And in such I would probably be quickly distracted by some better, or merely different, offering. Whatever. I try to think about taxes instead, I've not done my ISA this year. Maybe it would be a good time for savings comparison sites, though it would look pretty naff if she wakes up. I need to think about something else.

Light is coming outside. I finally fell asleep, and then woke up on and off, so it now just feels like I've not slept at all. Thank god it's Friday. Well Saturday now. She's still sleeping and has even stopped snoring. I want her secret.

Hours later, the sun is well up and shining through the curtains. She's starting to make morning grunts. I get up, and go to the bathroom. "I think you came all over my top" she remarks when I come back, being impressively alert for a deep sleeper. "My pleasure." We smile. I lend her a t-shirt, while noting they're not really that visible, those stains, you could go to a job interview with that, at least in academia. She seems more awake than me already, declines my offer of stale instant coffee, and departs, energetically. An air of soft melancholy sets in, before I fall properly asleep, at last.

Anti Social Behaviour Order

Liverpool Street. I've been invited to a house party by the most tenuous of acquaintances, a friend of a friend of Henry's, somewhere in the East End, where the tube doesn't tread. Henry lives at an angle from there, so we'll meet at the party. It's the acquainted host's birthday. I believe I only met her once, in a pub with Henry when she and others came and were gone within half an hour. I'm not sure about crashing the private party of someone I so vaguely know; we'll see.

Somewhere behind me on the train a lawyer has a phone conversation with an apparently teenage client, who can escape the young offender's institution if he keeps a low profile for at least six months, and can cope with his parents, that the lawyer says are the ones who need some parenting. She's quite motherly with the kid, from what I can tell.

I reach the quiet row of terraced houses a short hop away from the forlorn suburban station. Some houses are a bit battered but there's only one which I notice with a really unkempt front garden complete with a collection of traffic cones, all dirty, mostly damaged, perhaps vintage. The host's is the one with the freshly painted lilac door, the only bit of the house showing any hint of freshness. Rusty bicycles, disorderly pots, some more cared for than others, flank the entrance. Her flatmate answers. He gets me in, it's one of those parties anybody could get in it seems, looking for familiarity I look through the door of the front room, which has a big PA system in the window recess, a Victorian chimney, a battered piano, and furniture that probably was left there by a long dead resident. We move onto the kitchen, the host, Susan, is there, and recognises me. Good memory, and she is one of those who is absent minded as a matter of character. She, however, thinks we met at a pub I'm pretty certain I've never been to.

After she's disappeared on the door bell ringing, I get to chat with the flatmate, a philosophy graduate on a subject I fail to comprehend, something to do with heliotropic dialectic. I ask if he teaches. Sometimes, but not this year. Lucky students. Henry pops up behind him, so I'm saved from labyrinthine philosophy and the party-crashing feeling. He quickly finds someone else I vaguely know. "She was there when Elisa pissed on you", he says. "I think everybody remembers what they were doing when Elisa pissed

on me, it was almost a 9/11 moment.” He concurs; “we should get more terrorists into water sports, it would make the world so much more enlightened, maybe the Merkins could parachute some videos on Afghanistan.” I argue that I’ve long thought that more porn implies progress; John, of pissing day fame, contributes an anecdote: while he was travelling in India, the train guards broadcast some very Californian gonzo on the departure announcement screens, for a good quarter of an hour. Henry, who went to a strict old fashioned catholic school, goes on his classic diatribe, heard before but always a pleasure, that if sex shops are 18 plus so should be churches, which are much more dangerous to impressionable young minds than a few plastic dicks and anatomical videos can be. John retorts that the Church of England is really about cake and not so much about child abuse.

The host, a papist agent maybe, interrupts with a request to shift beer crates from the garden shed. “You store beer in the garden shed, in this neighbourhood? Hasn’t the word spread around?” asks Henry. Apparently not. After the lifting we retreat to a quiet corner of the garden where I can ask Henry to brief me on our landlord. He’s laconic and uninterested, but says enough to learn that the philosopher is famously languishing in a dusty corner of his institution, ten years into writing an heavy tome, that Susan suspects has not been progressing for some time. He notes that she must have invited at least three exes. And then he needs a beer. On the way thereto, he meets Susan, who monologues, he listens patiently, equally absent mindedly, until she’s interrupted by some guy in a woolly hat. We reach the kitchen, Henry gets a bottle, opens it, takes a sip and says “I don’t even fancy beer, I think I need to go home. Might have caught some bug or something.” He’s soon gone.

At the bottom of the staircase Susan is talking about council politics with Woolly Hat. He says his name, which I forget immediately. Can’t help thinking woolly hats indoors rarely work, and maybe nor do they outdoors on him. It does give a hint of individuality, at the expense of credibility I suppose. Susan tries to get me on her side of the conversation, which is on whether art funding is successfully targeted at emerging artists, while he argues it just goes to a coterie of people who would get money from private sales anyway. He does sound installations, which are a hard sell, as you can’t put them above your sofa. Susan argues she’s seen good stuff get funding, though concedes it might help to be at the right cocktail party at the right time. I contribute that I dated one of the heads of something, sculpture I think that was, at the Arts Council and didn’t get any funding, or even action, but she seemed reasonably legit as much as I could tell. I want to tell them how she dumped me, but they’ve already moved onto how they can’t stand formal vernissages. I think free booze must be fun, while saying nothing and just eyeing Woolly Hat’s joint. He pauses, and passes it on. Susan declines,

“Wine, I'm faithful to wine, it's the love of my life.”

As they get more involved with the argument, I mentally disconnect from the conversation and look at a short, pretty, fit blonde talking to an Italian-looking arty type on the other side of the corridor. He seems uneasy. She seems odd. Straight cut shoulder length hair, almost corporate, though she's not, in looks and even less in vibe. Feels odd, the Italian seems agitated. I can't hear what they say. He moves out, I just overhear “go and talk with someone else” as he moves away signalling her to stay where she is. She looks like she's just scanning the corridor to find someone else, apparently fails to see us, and disappears in the kitchen. I think that a gift of invisibility has its uses sometimes.

The resident philosopher walks past and collects me for bringing down some wine from upstairs. The bottles are stored in Susan's room, somewhere under a pile of shoes. Ageing but repainted sideboard by the window, wooden bed of turned white stained wood, the furniture here has seen something of an editor more recently than that downstairs. There's a distinct air of good taste, even the considerable amount of knick knack, like the shoe sculpture, seems carefully in its place. He digs in, and finds two wine cases. We take them down.

Back down, I take one of the warm beers we've just brought – there was indeed no more in the fridge – and move on to the garden. I sit on a bench next to a couple, and wish I smoked to keep the idle moment busy. “I'll grab some cake,” says the man, who gets up and walks into the house. “Have you tried the raspberry cake?” the woman asks me. Somewhere in her mid thirties, inoffensively pleasant to look at, rather slim, probably short, imprecisely dark hair with its first traces of grey, an equally inoffensive long face, she insists on the cake matter, before asking me where I'm from. She's from Argentina. It's a long way. “Don't you find the northern tribes a bit cold?”, I ask? “The English can definitely be a bit aloof but there's people from everywhere in London, more so than Buenos Aires. There's a big expat community and I could have an almost exclusively Argentinian, or Latin American, social life here, which would be a bit lame, arguably.” The discussion deviates towards the weather before I have the opportunity to satisfy my curiosity on her pathways to the rainy isles. “Yes, this weather is sometimes depressive. Do you know that Buenos Aires has the highest rate of shrinks per inhabitant in the world?”, she asks. I acknowledge my being enlightened, and ask for more. She explains that it probably has something to do with Argentinians being melancholic, perhaps being at an end of the world where nature is so powerful, and often overwhelming, so you get more introspective, and this needs a mirror. “Psychoanalysis is a mirror into your own soul, when it's done well. Unfortunately, there are a lot of charlatans,”

she continues, “although at least in Argentina it's not like the rich thing it is here, and there's some affordable analysts.” I ask if she's done one herself and indeed she has, for seven years, including a bit here, but she wasn't pleased with her London shrink, and now is on a break from the mirror. “At some point you get to know yourself. The most important thing is childhood, and well, while you can always dig up some more memories, at some point you know what you know.” I ask, “But can't some memories be repressed so deep that you need digging for a long time, I think that's what I'd say as an analyst who wants to keep the custom and it may even make some sort of vague sense in a more absolute kind of way.” She nods, “the essence of childhood issues is usually the relationship with the mother, when that's good, everything falls into place; kids are totally formed if their early years and the mother figure controls their world, and thus they're not equipped to deal with surplus shit that comes their way.” I have a sip of my beer, and ask “What about the dad?” She replies that the mum chooses the dad. Most crap that comes from the dad ultimately comes from a poor choice of mate by the mother, which is double whammy: if you have a problem selecting dads, you'll probably be a crap mum as well. I comment that it's an interesting argument in favour of arranged marriages, where there's a chance the failings would be evened out, as it takes one dimension of the cock-up away from the individual, and you need generational failure to fail. She smiles, “which isn't unheard of either!”

Her boyfriend comes back – where has he been all this time? – and she tells him, “my friend here thinks arranged marriages are the best, do you agree?” I smile. “Would be less fucking work,” he replies, and quickly moves on to how entertaining house parties are, that there are a lot of interesting people here, he remarks with an ironic tone. “Have you found a mirror?” she asks. I chime in, “Nope, he was looking at me from the kitchen all this time I think.”

Soon after, Susan comes to the garden and announces the living room gig will be starting. It's about 10pm. Everybody moves through the crowded kitchen. There's almost a queue in the corridor. Four band members and perhaps twenty guests is tight for this living room. People in front of me go back to the kitchen to grab some beverages, I get in and find a little bit of space near the back wall, opposite the bit of the room that serves as a stage. The guitarist and the bassist are tuning their instruments. It's loud. Still comfortably so but I wonder how much gets out of that frail Victorian frame. The singer arrives. Fittingly skinny, tight black jeans, everything black like the rest of the band, pointy shoes, but not quite hipster. Well into their thirties, they've probably been at it for a while. They don't seem like they've had their breakthrough, or, probably, ever will, although they may have tickled the radar on occasion. I mentally reproach myself for being excessively judgemental when nothing has even started. They look kind

enough after all. Being nice is however no sure path to greatness.

Corridor Blonde is a couple of steps away, talking to a hipster kid, a cute mid twenties, straight short black hair, stripy orange and brown top, indiscriminate jeans. She talks about a shop she knows down the road from here. "Their clothes are fantastic," she says in a slow monotone detached voice that's at odds with her words, "all hand made by the owner, she has her sewing machine at the back of the store." She looks at the young girl – whose face, or profile from where I stand, does not let any expression escape, neither bothered nor interested – intensely. She goes on to describe a garment as I become puzzled, comfortable in being able to stalk on the scene unnoticed. "That last blouse I got there, it's so nice I'm still waiting for the right occasion to use it." She pauses. She stares, more, for a second, or two. She moves her head decisively and has her lips touch the girl's. Who after an unresponsive second, or two, moves back, apparently as unbothered as she's uninterested. She looks back in a way I can't see, but which turns Corridor Blonde's expression to possibly some kind of upset. She frowns, glances back disapprovingly, and wanders out of the room, like a mosquito in search of light.

After a brief introduction by Susan, who only tells us that they're called the Ecstatic Shepherds and about the festival they were at earlier in the day, and something about the greatness of birthdays during which my mind wandered away, the gig starts. Pleasant enough guitar rock of some variety. The PA sort of works in this living room, the guitarist plays sound engineer and keeps adjusting the mix console settings. DJ envy I wonder. A few tracks in, the music shifts nonchalantly into melodic melancholy, half the people are now sitting on the floor. Woolly Hat has his head against the wall, looking at the ceiling, eyes closed. I sporadically stalk a no less absent minded red hair girl, fake colour, baroque print black and white dress, tights and sophisticated brown leather shoes, small and pointy. She looks vaguely in my direction but I seem invisible to her. She radiates a distance that is interesting. And then a guy comes back with a beer and makes her disappear from my field of vision, only her shoes and a bit of leg remain visible. I'm starting to get tired of the easy but lazy rock, despite it being more than half decent, if not to the level where I'd want the CD.

Now stationed in the kitchen, I passively absorb the atmosphere. Or lack thereof. Susan comes in and out, floating in another dimension, she pours herself a glass of wine with the precise oft repeated movement of a factory line robot, and disappears swiftly thereafter. As I enjoy the fly on the wall experience, a Latin-looking guy whose existence I had not noticed earlier asks "have you seen Gwendoline?" I shake my head. He goes on to describe her. I shake my head again. "You know, I'm sure she has a great career in front of

her. She's the best actress I've ever met. She totally enthrals her audience!" As he speaks I think she must be a waitress, with an arse to die for. He soon continues, "she shouldn't be in this job. Boots! Can you believe it?" I confirm I am incredulous such talent should be wasted on providing the public with toothpaste and cheap perfume. The waxing lyrical lasts until someone I don't see calls him through the door frame. By now I'm nearly as disappointed as him regarding the disappearance of the retail princess.

Having moved my quarters to the living/stage room, I listen to a guitar solo by a member of the band, which I like better than most of the gig previous. Perhaps he should start a solo career. Woolly Hat is sitting nearby, similarly appreciative, it appears. I commence a dense examination of the painting hanging opposite, next to a battered commode, the varnished dark wood and orderly hopefulness of which dates it from, I hazard a guess, the postwar years; and it might have been there since. The painting is of a moorland scene, probably of the same generation as the commode. I understand what's missing from the whole scene. One of Alfred Wainwright's carefully hand-drawn guides to fell walking would fit in perfectly with the ghosts living in this room. A squeaky grumble, louder than the guitar, which may or may not have finished with a "fuck off!" makes me land back into the present. Corridor Blonde is near the door, talking to a slightly taller, sizably wider, and markedly less attractive girl in her similar twenties who's framed by the door. The guitarist remains busy with his instrument. I can't see the blonde's face but her sparing partner is looking notably but controllingly upset. She talks. Quiet words I can't grasp, that far away. Corridor Blonde attempts a slap, which her partner elopes. I recognise a "listen," before the rest of the sentence disappears in a riff. Woolly Hat to my right seems to have taken over staring at the painting opposite. A couple of people near the door, and their attached drinks, are talking oblivious to the nearby anger. Corridor Blonde looks around, and back, and I catch a glimpse at electric eyes looking haphazardly around. She shouts a "you bitch!", and grabs the long, dark and curly hair of her opposite number. With uncannily theatrical precision, a few seconds later the opponent is on the ground, two thirds inside the room, with her upper body outside, while the blonde is sitting astride her repeating "Bitch!" stroboscopically, while using her spare hand to squash her opposition's face on the ground. She frees her head, with the blonde now smacking her back and forth. The guitarist still plays. Corridor Blonde, by now highly tense, looks up and down. The bass guitar of the band is on its stand near the door. Corridor Blonde looks like she wouldn't mind taking it and using it to hammer down her opposition, but thankfully seems too angry to think strategically. She settles for a smacking back and forth. Now this is enough for the audience to catch up, though nobody seems particularly in a state of understanding what they're on about or what to do. I'd rather move to quieter climes, but they're completely occupying the doorway so we're

basically stuck here until the situation settles. The girls are now locked into a synchronous position where the bottom one has grabbed enough of the blonde's formerly spare arm to hold her. They're just looking angrily at each other. A last repetition of "fucking fucking fucking bitch" has been enough to take the guitarist out of his solo. "Eh wait, you guys, keep cool" says someone followed by a few approbatory grunts. Susan appears behind the door frame, with a glass of wine, "what are you guys doing?" surprisingly to the point for her character, and enough of a distraction to get the down girl to escape the lock, and stand back up, astonishingly quickly. A couple of people then pop up between them, trying to reason with them or just chatting the tension away. Corridor Blonde is moving in short steps back and forth, still with her electric ways, but appearing more disoriented, scattering short grunts at the room. Her opponent has been whisked away into the unknown beyond the door frame. It's time for me to get up and disappear before it gets any more exciting.

It's only half past three. I'm now sitting in the garden, standing by in a conversation between a group I had hardly noticed. I immediately take a fancy for an early thirties girl in a brown pullover, long brown hair and a clever smile on her face. They're talking, with a couple of possibly arty blokes who had the good sense of not falling into hipsterdom, sans woolly hat and all, about one of the party's trip to Iceland. He tried and failed to go to on outdoor heavy metal festival in the western wilderness, having booked his flight according to the dates the previous year. When he arrived the festival had just finished, the Sunday before he flew in. Brown Pullover finds that it's sweet to be so detached from reality. I try to guess who she's with, but fail for lack of sufficient clues. He ended up going to the gay pride in Reykjavik, a family event as much as anything, "given how little happens there", interrupts the other fellow, a quiet character in a beige shirt, uncharacteristically formal for this night. He continues telling a tale of encountering a very drunk kid, like 20 or 21, on the pride's evening, who chatted him up between bars, invited him to join him at some venue, explaining that he's not gay, you know, but he's totally okay with gay bars, and he hoped our guy wouldn't mind. He didn't mind himself but after some walking that guy fell edgy enough to suggest parting company, at which point the kid flipped and got on a quasi-racist rant on how horrible Brits are in general, excluding our correspondent for sure. An incoming phone call the kid took got him the excuse to depart. People quickly agree that it was one confused young man. Brown Pullover says you can see this sort of ambiguity when young normal types end up drunk and fighting in postures where at every moment it could switch between kiss and punch, were it not for the weight of social conventions. He then moves on to waxing lyrical about bathing in an open air warm pool in the hills just half an hour away from Reykjavik.

I'm now wandering around the corridors. The night seem to have found an inner quietness. Not in volume level however, as the two guitarists are now jamming together in the living room. Susan is asleep in a battered armchair, sitting at an odd angle. Half a nipple emerges from her cleavage. I briefly exchange a couple of vacuities on how nice a night it is. I presume one half of the fighting pair of girls has gone home, or in any case, elsewhere, but don't mention it. It feels inappropriate to introduce substance of any kind, and let the droning but hypnotic guitar soundtrack own the moment.

Having thought it was a good time to depart, I'm walking down the street, where I can't see any sign of life. Only a couple of houses a hundred yards towards the main road have faint lights behind drawn curtains. It's all quiet and peaceful, save for the droning guitar, which, while muffled, can still be heard so distinctly, even as I am a dozen or two houses down the street. I'm puzzled that nobody called the coppers or just came down to the house to make a scandal, which would well be justified. Maybe they'll apply for an antisocial behaviour order first thing Monday morning, or are too stiff upper lipped, or perhaps too old and hard of hearing to complain? I reach my bus stop without having resolved that mystery.

As I'm checking the timetable – first bus in 25 minutes, as I expected – Brown Pullover hails me from the car park behind the bus shelter. She's with the whole Icelandic conversation, entering a brown Ford fiesta matching her pullover. “Hey! Do you need a lift?” Some confused attempt at establishing direction seems to hint that they're going further eastwards, I decline from afar and sit down as a thin drizzle starts to hint at the coming morning. Minutes later, shivering, it sinks in that going eastwards may have had some merit.

Seeking salvation

Petro emailed me on Monday that he was going to another speed dating thing, as the true regular he is, and if I wanted to join and that it would be a good time to catch up. So I agree, he's found some variation on the theme, a wine tasting on Friday evening. The only one of this type is some distance away towards West London suburbia, Hammersmith way.

After a dull ride with too many commuters – he should really have found a place contra-flow – I arrive at the venue. A huge pub with many green and dark rooms, some of them with disco balls, and a faint but steady smell of stale beer everywhere. I guess that's where the local folks come and dance at the weekend. After getting lost in an obviously closed section of the establishment, I finally find the room where our event is taking place. Petro is already at the bar in conversation with a twenty-something. I think the age range was 25-35 and ponder if she matches. Petro says hello, and introduces me, she's called Vanessa, and works in telesales, up the road from here. Slightly chubby if fresh faced, a bit too much make up, half length chemical blonde hair, and a slightly too tight top whose lower end is not complimentary to her overly mushy midriff. Petro goes on a long tale about how he once spent an entire month in a sales department, as a student summer job, and how good he thought the dating possibilities were there, but at the time he was with someone so missed out on it entirely. “Did it have something to do with age? It's easier if everybody is in their early 20s”, I say. Vanessa smirks. Petro turns to her, “you must have many admirers, chanting below the balcony.” Not really, she explains it's rather grim and with timed breaks and cubicles and not the place to socialise much, she only knows a few of her office neighbours, mostly older girls and that fat bloke who's a nice guy but too thick and ugly, who lives with his mum and only talks about his Playstation. “I have a Playstation back in Italy”, says Petro, letting a quick corner smile escape in my direction. She smiles back at him, “but you're not living with your mum!” I think he might get a ‘yes’ from this one on the little card.

The host, another of these late twenties Australian backpacker types, though no sign of accent, so he – it's a guy this time – is probably not Australian at all. West country maybe. He explains how it works: we're divided into tables

of six for the tasting, one wine per table. Each round is 3 boys and 3 girls per table, which then rotate within this table, coming back to classic speed dating one to ones. Petro and I are separated by numbers so we'll swap impressions later on, "good harvest!" he says before moving towards his table, after the host has disentangled him from Vanessa.

Opposite me a burly bloke with a bland office shirt is already sitting. He seems shy and not at ease, though probably good marriage material for some here. I find out that he's a trade unionist working at HQ near Kings' Cross before we get actual ladies and the third guy, some sporty type who's practically walking around with a "dick head" sign above him, despite having only said hello. The girls are on the higher end of the age range, it seems, or above, two of them came together and the other one has left her mate, it seems, at Petro's table. The two who came together are called Laura and Carla, despite no Italian connections whatsoever, as we all rush to ask that obvious question. After glancing at the list that has been left on the table, I remark that what we're going to taste is Italian, and that we have no expert. The poor joke doesn't inflame the table but is enough to have the dick-head type talk about his holiday, which is a relief despite learning nothing of interest.

"This wine seemed like nothing much" I say to the exceedingly unexciting older girl as we start our two minute one-to-one. She nods. She obviously has made some effort for tonight, looks like she got a fresh manicure and worked on her make up, if not particularly successfully. Formal-ish dark pink dress, it could work out for a wedding. I wonder if she went home and changed or had to endure the costume all day at work. I don't ask. I imagine her as a cashier at Tesco but don't ask about her job – for once the conversation has not had to pass through that gate and is gently settled on the merits of Sheffield, where she hails from. "I stayed in a chain hotel there opposite a mosque," I contribute, "although the reason I went there escapes me at the moment."

Her colleague goes through her two minutes equally pointlessly. I like the third one better. Though she keeps glancing at the dick head guy. So I think it's a lost cause. She's one of those girls you don't want to like but still can't help fancying just because they're cute. I make a fool of myself trying to be vaguely interesting telling about my Japan trip, which she yawns away dismissively. I still have to make the story last until the bell saves me, not before having had to endure the smuggest possible "Nice to meet you" that has ever been inflicted upon me. Insufferable but looks and balls, I can't help feeling some attraction for her. Online, she would be one of those you would pointlessly still write to despite being both unlikely to get a reply, and sure to go wrong if she were to. I really need the next glass of wine.

Pause. Next table, next wine, more people; I may prefer the wine. A fruity white, whatever. Chit chat, a bland teacher opposite, though quite chatty, has definitive opinions on the fruitiness of the wine. Which she continues during our one to one. I would have trouble if conversation came to my side of the table; which thankfully it doesn't. The next is a short pretty thing, with above shoulder length curly black hair, blue eyes, a subtly cute thin face; and she seems adorable to boot. I get more nervous than usual but the conversation flows. Finishing off her Ph.D in some biology, in Antwerp, though she's from somewhere in the northern Dutch countryside. She's just in London for the weekend staying at a friend's who is at the next table, and thought this would be fun. She smiles, holds my gaze just long enough to get lost in it, and then flows into the conversation. I'm almost getting relaxed when the next round comes.

After another half glass of wine and more small talk not worth taking part in, let alone remembering, I move towards the bar, instinctively, before realising I don't quite need a drink in this configuration, and there's still three more rounds of wine tasting to go. I settle on a stool, looking for Petro, who's talking to Antwerp girl, good boy. I wonder if I should get up and join, when I get interrupted "this is perhaps not the best selection of wine, is it?" I turn, it's a big toff somewhere in his fifties, with a tweed jacket but sympathetic air. I imagine he could have been an Oscar Wilde type of character had he been alive then. He seems interesting, but as I keep nodding at his comments on wine I can't help looking at Petro and the Antwerp girl, her friend, and two other guys; thinking I might be missing something being out of the action. I gather this speed dating thing is much better for finding male mates than girls. He's now talking about Tuscany, about the stone towers in the villages, but I've missed how we got there from bad wine. I finally abandon him, to join the others, just as the host signals the next rounds of tasting. So I've been rude for naught.

I find my table and sit opposite a blonde, fresh faced, cleavage, looks like the right kind of curvy; we get our rounds of wine, she's with her friend, to the right, a slender yet distinctly unattractive brunette. The guy next to me is quite talkative, he's from Ireland, and talks about the distinct lack of wine there, and that you can't eat peat. The girls mention Guinness as a redeeming factor, which is his passion. "Maybe we should all go to a Guinness tasting evening", I suggest. "But there's only one type", the brunette responds. "Even better", all laugh. At last I manage to relax a bit in this session. The host rings his bell, and I keep on a gentle conversation with the fresh faced curvy girl, which I start to like, her friend, which few could like, and then at last the third girl who had been sitting quietly at the far end of the table. As I have another glass of that tasting wine, which really doesn't taste like much, I'm starting to get intoxicated enough to stop even the automated targeting.

All the girls are starting to merge into a festival of bland, cute and ugly blonde and brunette all at the same time. She's Spanish. She indeed looks like she could be in an Almodovar film. Not quite Penelope Cruz, more whoever would play the mum, although she needs to take in 10 or 20 years to be able to get that role. She's pleasant to talk to, with a clever smile, an unusual sense of style for that upper part of her body that's visible, with a green cardigan on top of the just right level of open neck lilac top underneath, and some artfully half unfolded scarf on her shoulder, while still giving enough hints of her soft neck skin. Do I like two at one table I start to wonder, as we finish. I look sideways at the curvy girl as she stands up, I hadn't noticed her standing before, and it is with some dismay that I see, slowly, an award winningly large arse emerge from below the table. Wrong kind of curvy. And I don't really like an Almodovar mum to be, do I?

The routine keeps on going absent mindedly for two more rounds. I barely taste the wine, barely listen to the girls, to the point where I don't even get relieved when it's over as I had nicely settled into auto-pilot. As the last bell rings and the host explains it's over, cards to fill, blah, I ponder who I like, the insufferable cutie, still, though a glance to my right sees her, predictably drooling at the feet of Dick Head, complete with the most cheesy of white leather spiky shoes. I guess it's working for some. He's upped the collar of his shirt as if to underline, I don't know, the victory of dick-headedness.

So that leaves the Belgian; "let's join them," says Petro as he walks past and takes me out of my cold though drunken assessment games. She's with her mate and what looks like two other admirers. Petro squeezes in, and I settle for her less in demand friend, who I quizz about how they found the night. She seems ambivalent in her way of telling how fun it was. She's not utterly cute but her cleavage is tempting, just three button downs of a business shirt and a bit of bra on display, probably a B, quite successfully, albeit I gather not purposefully, arranged; with some effort I think I manage to avoid staring. "London is such a difficult place to meet people, everybody's so busy." I reply that there's something to that, that the logistics get in the way every time you want to even just meet up with regular friends. She remarks that people tend to cluster to some extent to remedy that, for example most of her friends live in North London, or the trendy bits of East London, she hardly knows anyone in West London, like where we are. "So you came for the wine?", I ask. She smiles, and says that the concept seemed fun, she had read about it in the papers, and the more central occurrences were at inconvenient dates, "like us," I remark. "Oh you came with that smooth Italian!" The other admirers have left, unnoticed as I was working hard fighting cleavage, and we reconfigure as a group.

Petro exclaims that it's almost impossible to find a decent flat in London.

“But you managed to find somewhere near Hyde Park.” He counters that all the rooms, well both of them, are tiny and it's 3 floors up with no lift, and the water pressure is weak. “No plumbing, we're British” says the girl from Antwerp, whose name I realise I didn't register, ironically. Her mate says that Stevenage is okay, not that expensive and convenient for the trains, cycle paths and greenery everywhere. “Isn't the nightlife a bit slow?”, I ask. “Well it's not very interesting, and you go to London for that, but there's some amount of locals beating each other up on Saturday pub closing time, as in any respectable market town.” Reasonable, though somehow I ponder if I could ever go out with someone who thinks Stevenage is okay. Even if it is okay.

The girls leave soon after – I don't think it's related to my barely concealed disdain for suburbia – having trains to catch and early mornings, or allegedly so. Petro has been quick and nimble enough to get everyone's numbers in his ancient phone from the 1990s. “Aren't you running out of slots in this thing's phone book?” I ask. He protests that he doesn't get that many numbers, and has a look, 165/200, “of which 150 girls, suspected singles of some sort, I think.” I suggest he gives free drinks, or perhaps simply proposes, to the one who fills the phone. He responds that I could do the same with say my hundredth online date, “How many are you at?” Indeed not far from 100, I think. How romantic it would be to say “Welcome to my hundredth date?”, I'm telling him. “Well if you're lucky the girl will have a much larger book, and you'll be her 500th” says Petro. I tell him it's statistically unlikely, most people either find someone quick or drop out, I suspect. I've had lots of beginners, which is a hassle, because they have stupidly high expectations, possibly fantasize whatever you're not before meeting, and it all makes it a high stake game that spoils getting to know someone. Dating is difficult enough without having to face the is-he-the-man-of-my-life judgement calls within the first five minutes. I'm sure some credible stories get killed just because of that. “And, worse, the first five sober minutes,” he comments, “if humanity had to pick breeding mates sober it would have disappeared.” I reply that it may have just become very protestant instead.

“Did you gentlemen enjoy the night?”, asks the host as he joins us. Petro nods and says that the formula is a bit more relaxed than regular wine-free speed dating, but that they could do it more often and in more central places. The host says he's been doing that for a couple of years now. “Have you been invited to many marriages in that time?” I ask him. He answers almost none, apart from being invited to one in Ireland, which he didn't go to. “That was a funny story,” he says, “a client really liked one of the barmaids, at a place where we'd been doing a few events, and he told me at the end of the evening, that he liked her more than any of the ladies from the event. He didn't ask her number or anything but after he had gone I casually told her of

his interest, and she had liked him too, and was single, and so I hooked them up, and it worked out. That's the only one really, though there's some news of couples that comes up every so often in the office.” Petro says that people probably don't report their hookups, laughing. We agree that it may be a bit too in your face really for successful mating, the girls have their protection shields switched on full strength at such an event. “Yeah, the guys not so much, the pretty girls always get half or more of the blokes giving them a yes.” says the host, before departing back to be professionally jovial to a table with a couple of large teachers who certainly won't get many.

“This place is getting dead. We won't get any more juice from this particular sponge” says Petro. “Move on?” I ask. We're stuck in unmapped West London dullness. On a Friday night, with upcoming hordes of post work suburban commuters about to flood into the weekend as disgracefully as they can. As we leave the pub, I ask if he also got the number of this Vanessa girl he was all over at the start of the gig. “Nope, I think I'll have to use the site thing, if she doesn't ‘no’ me, which she'll probably do, as we know women. I was busy with chasing the girl from Antwerp, oh yeah, I didn't tell you, while her mate was talking away with you we somehow got into an unusually intimate conversation and she revealed that she's really got a boyfriend at home, with on and off moments but she was just really there for some fun and not really to pull.” I remark he did get her number nonetheless. “Yes she seemed relaxed about that, either it's a temporary or fake one, or she's trusting, I don't know. After all I have a London phone and an Italian phone and they don't mix.” – “No work phone?” I interrupt – “No I've managed to opt out of that, they can phone me on my London phone if there's a market meltdown or whatever. People always connected in this industry don't work any better really.”

We're now on the tube back to town. It's at least less jammed than on the way out. I come back to the Vanessa that Petro was all over when I arrived, and tell him it's uncharacteristic of him to let her get away. “Yeah, cute young things, they're distracting, it's both pointless and hopeless, they're hard to get and boring if you do get them” he says. “I wouldn't go and sleep in the bath if I got one”, I comment. “Depends on which floor she lives on, I'm a lazy old guy, if there's a comfy bath tub in the valley and a Vanessa three hours walk up the mountain, I'll take the bath tub I think. Drinks help as well, I've gotten more detached after all this crap wine.” I remark, “OK, don't take an Italian to an English wine tasting!” He says that it was actually bearable and he knows almost nothing about wine anyway, he's rather into coffee really, booze he does, but it's not really that essential.

We're reaching the tube stop for our ultimate goal – the Shoreditch Rabbit – and as we step out, Petro asks, “did I tell you my tube story?” Nope, I reply.

He then describes how he was once sitting opposite a cute brunette on this very line, who was reading a copy of *The Tartar Steppe* in Italian. She seemed to have noticed him looking at her and did not seem particularly upset about it, which is a positive. When he got up to leave at his stop, she did the same behind him. Once on the platform, he turned and told her, “Bit depressive but well written, one of the few books I liked when I had to read it at school, do you like it?” she seemed surprised, looked at him from head to toe for a second or two, then smiled and from then on they had a nice conversation in the escalator and for a good ten minutes on the pavement until it started raining and she had to make her excuses. He got her business card. “Nice one, and, and?” I ask, on a cliffhanger. He replies that he emailed her, a week ago, and got no reply; not too astonishing, really, it was a long shot. “Still do that 100 times and you're doomed to hit some action”, I suggest. “Yeah, in your quantitative world, but it was more of a black swan, or a grey swan, or whatever colour swans that are nice and not catastrophic but almost as rare as the black ones are.”

We arrive at the place, it has large windows to the street, a slick bar, smooth furniture, with lots of white, green and lilac. A wall of bottles is behind the white glossy bar, made with that expensive-looking synthetic material. It's a bit crowded, twenty-thirty mix of post work city types and poseurs, lots of heels and blondes with the girls, polo and suits, with ties in pocket for the boys. But no valet parking for the Porsche. I remark some trendies at the end of the bar, and in the crowd further, as well, with the sophisticated haircut, him and her, and the carefully composed – and laundered daily – outfits. Token artists or artistic tokens, I cannot tell. Anyway, as we enter the trashy chic I notice a spiral staircase, complete with stainless steel railings, going down under. “Let's have a look down there, hell's kitchen perhaps?” says Petro.

There are a couple of seats free at the opposite end of the room from the small dance floor, made larger looking by surrounding mirrors. Slick funky house, not even particularly loud by our table, which goes well with the decor. Which is too slippery kind of slick, yet better than the crowd, though it makes good crowd watching. “It's crap but a pretty distracting kind of crap isn't it?” confirms Petro. He continues, “Look at this couple down there by the end of the bar, City boy talking, blonde nodding, do you think he'll pull?” I only pull a “Probably.” He then goes on an incongruously, for the place, philosophical lament on the difficulty of mating properly. He wants to start over again, the life in Italy is not working, but it's so tricky in his society to break out of it. Despite the high divorce rate, I contend. “People come to it, it's just a painful road. Catholic penitence, life isn't supposed to be funny” I remark that what makes relationship work, or at the minimum start, is context, more than some silly idea of the one-in-a-million match. “Yeah,

homo sapiens pedanticus has long disappeared”, he says, “but women are still behaving like they're looking for some first wonder of the world, that elusive mix of James Bond, Albert Einstein, bound together by a family man who tells bedtime stories to the kids and worships his princess. Which of course neither Bond nor Einstein did. We need to be a synthetic improvement on a mythical ideal, mission impossible. Well it's not that we guys don't have silly expectations, but it's mostly about being a mate and good looking, arguably unrealistically good looking, but at least that's simple and you can do make up or surgery, while no surgeon that can turn you into James Bond.” I add, “and no brain surgeon into Einstein.” He continues that perhaps the family man thing is the easiest thing to learn or pretend about. I say that I have some sympathy for the girls looking for such miracles, if someone really met the Bond-Einstein, and he stays with them, it's so flattering. It makes sense that women get attracted to the guy who can have any woman but would choose to stay with them. Of course it's largely unattainable, those guys will rather have any woman than stay with the first one who comes up. “Well it happens sometimes, when I was in my last year of high school, the prettiest girl of the class – but it was a bad year and she's really just ordinarily pretty – went out with the handsomest boy, who wasn't even half an idiot and is a lawyer now. From what I hear from my home town they're still together and the model perfect couple, and he could have got any girl, yet he settled for a first offer who was okay but he could have had so many more, then and now as he has aged well too, and she's grown rotund and moustached, provincial and too quick into mama mode. Or that's what it looks like from the gossip, and last time I saw them at the wedding of our family's dentist.”

We've now navigated to the dance floor area, for a change of view. It's only half full, dancing is obviously not the primary concern of the patrons here. I go for a toilet break. A pink polo shirt and a tie-less suit are precariously setting up a coke line on a credit card. They smile at passers-by. I find toilet socialising attempts peculiarly awkward, but so in character for this decidedly prestigious establishment.

When I come back to our little observation point, Petro is talking to a twenty something blonde; student, chain clothing, but blonde, skinny, and that age is a full hit. “I'm from Luxembourg.” Expensive, I think. She replies dryly and concisely to the quick fire questions. Student, yes, likes London, nice place, I wonder if he's going to run out of lines or if she's going to extricate herself first. I try to think of something to relax the atmosphere, but she does finish with a sharp “My boyfriend's there, good night!” before I have time to finish thinking. “Petro, my friend, you were trying a bit too hard here.” He sighs. “Hm.” He becomes pensive. “Yes, silly, I'm just a slave to women!” I correct him: “Girls.” He admits, “Well, well, I also can get enthusiastic about thirty

some things. But it's a nice skill to have, to be able to talk to randoms that easily." He explains it came late to him, he was crap when a teenager or in his twenties, but once you start to get the hang of it, it becomes second nature. I say that the skill comes with the passport in his case. "I wish", he smiles back.

He orders a shot of vodka, and remarks, "it's a very whorey place here. I wouldn't be surprised to see someone I've met before here. Yes, I don't know if I told you, I've been using commercial services lately." I get curious, and inquire "Worth the money?" He explains it's actually quite expensive, he quickly moved to the high end, to 300-400 quid a session. It's bloody expensive, but the 100-200 quid ones were too sad, mostly Eastern Europeans who are really doing that purely for the money, it shows and it's miserable. "Not that the upper end are not in it for the money, mostly, but they do fake it better and don't seem to be suffering. I don't actually like to mix sex and misery." I suggest he should try one of the sugar daddies websites, might suit his taste well, and I hear it's one of the few categories of dating sites with more girls than blokes. I expand, "I put up a profile someday there, but from what I could see without subscribing, it seemed not very appealing. They seem to all still be looking for prince charming, with a nice house, and funding for the kids' piano lessons and time for clothes shopping for the whole family." "You're not selling this, are you?" he quips. "Blondes! Youth! Eastern European!" He smiles. "You win, I'll try. Maybe." We agree it's probably much harder than the escorts. "And not necessarily cheaper, if you do the 300 ones once a week, or perhaps that's a bit much, 2-3 times a month, you may be left with change from a grand, which wouldn't buy you much in the sugar daddie situation, amortising the Porsche Boxster, clothes allowance, and that you have to live in a place 3 times as expensive as you'd otherwise do, and it's already way more expensive."

I got a fruit juice cocktail this time, it's been a long night. We're now silently watching the dance floor. A trio of posh kids dance, badly. One of the girls has trouble handling her high heels. The other adjusts her bra. I'm not even bothered trying to capture an interesting angle. A foggy nothingness floats around, unseen by anyone present. I feel sleepy. I stare more pensively, at my reflection in the wall length mirror opposite. Another kid rushes down the spiral staircase, looks around, driven. She walks in a straight line, towards the dance floor; no, towards me. "Hello!", she says a large smile in front of me, as she gets closer, "what's your name?" She's petite, with deep dark eyes, a round face, thick voluptuous lips, the fresh skin of youth, southern something, and curly dark hair. I barely have time to answer and try to formulate a question that the voluptuous lips reach straight for mine. Soft, brief, decisive. She moves back a little, looks into my eyes. I automatically put my hands on her back. We kiss again. I try to think. What the fuck? I

can't think. She holds back again, the eyes again, without the smile. She speaks softly "Save me!" She repeats, "Save me!" I'm taken aback. Think spiral staircase, taxi and torrid sex. By the end of the sixth second she looks around. I can't think. I must look befuddled. I am. A quick look back at me, around, and she moves, in her now signature straight line, to Petro. He moves, physically, back, almost standing down from his stool. She turns back. Goes dancing. For 10 seconds, and then disappears back up the spiral staircase. "She was nuts, that one!", Petro comments. "Yeah, well, no, well, yes", I fail to articulate any reasoning though. We sit silently, watching the crowd, without seeing anything.

After a recovery shot, in a quieter corner, we decide to go home. "Wasn't too bad a night, was it?", Petro says when we hit the pavement. "Maybe I should have saved her," I say. "Shut up, and let's find taxis."

Vicious circle

It has been three days since I last got a message from ‘autumnflower’, which I had already almost forgotten and mentally discarded in the endless inbox of unanswered messages. As I read her reply I remember that I had indeed written to her. Profile OK. Looks OK. Thick jacket on the one picture but one sees enough of the upper body to think she's within the realm of reasonable proportions. Apart from that nothing special in the profile but nothing wrong either, maybe it was not even a mistake to ask her out. I suggest a Barbican outing on Thursday.

Two hours later she's agreed. Another Barbican date it will be. I go for a walk round the block. The meat market is quiet, few trucks waiting outside, the hospital you cannot easily tell is one, a few lights shine from offices, possibly forgotten more than hard working. The Old Bailey is a shadow of its old self. Five tourists are still trying on the steps of St Paul's. Past the slick Salvation Army HQ – a hedge fund for poverty, slightly incongruous here, though they seem to have wisely rented the rest of the building to establishments more into the usual make-the-rich-richer business lines – and up the wobbly bridge for the Tate. And back. The grey deserted town appears surprisingly benign when one has a date. Maybe I should cancel and move it one day further, and thus forever; hope might be the best position to be in. Not that it's even that much hope, looks-Ok-sounds-Ok doesn't seem any more likely to go somewhere than all the others. The odds are perhaps not that different from those of being hit by a bus on the way back; which would not be that bad a way to die, I tell myself, compared to Dementia or long months of terminal cancer, whatever that may feel like and I so don't want to know – it must not be pretty. I then think that it's also not necessarily that desirable to survive too long, as a set of increasingly ill fitting parts. Like most ideas it looks good only for a fleeting moment, until logistics and the impurity of the real world turn them into the mushy peas of existence.

She's late, and out of breath. She looks slightly different from the photo, but in a non directional way, not better, not worse, not that different either. Not unpleasant. Bumps on her coat look promising. She doesn't unbutton as we reach the bar. It's quiet in the foyer, a show is on, I think, I tell her; she's found her breath. She's from Croatia, Zagreb. The coast is nicer, she says. It's

amazing, I should visit. Brown Balkan eyes, I imagine, unwarranted, I have no idea what Balkan eyes are like, if they exist at all; she unbuttons her coat, finally, and the semi-tight olive green – not the best choice of colour, but one notch up Eastern European golds or pinks – loosely tight pullover lets the idea of some delightful curves escape. It's precise in being the unrevealing revealing kind of revealing, including the presumed lack of intention, I can't imagine it's planned. She's talking about her day, the kids are exhausting. She teaches at a school for posh kids, the parents are crap at keeping them, so she has to do parenting for them. I nod. Some kid was up to some antics. I think curves. I stare at the signs behind her on occasion, giant Helvetica Bold lettering, curvy in its own way.

I speak little, I think we have a true chatterbox. It's relaxing. I learn about Croatia, the coast, the thing. She likes Brit pop. Oasis. That sort of stuff, I want to comment that it's so common on the website, every London chick in her thirties is into indie. Classical or metal are so niche. But I don't, talking about one's many other dates would be breaking protocol, which could lead to some embarrassment, like the time I lectured a flat chested girl about how boob jobs, according to Science, are one of the few things that tend to lift one's background level of happiness permanently up, unlike everything else – marriage, degrees, careers, illness, accidents – which all tend to normalise after a while back to people's standard level of happiness, which we seem to be born with, permanently getting used to and internalising both good and bad. “So do you really believe it's going to be cancelled?” she asks. Lost in my thoughts, I must collect myself to recall what we were talking about while I was nonchalantly nodding on. “The gig you mean?”, I say, her expression says I got that right. She was talking about some rumours, some musician being unwell, I think, but I lost track of what band it might be. “Well it depends, whatever, you'd get a refund if you get a ticket and it is cancelled. Not worth cancelling your plans just yet perhaps.”

People are coming out from the show. Crowd watching. I do my mini-lecture on concrete and postwar Corporation of London planning, getting almost enthusiastic. She doesn't seem to mind the break in her talking. People don't actually seem to be leaving, is the show continuing outside, I ponder, she's taken charge of the conversation again, and goes on about how the heating doesn't work well in her school building. Fireworks noises, does that explain the people going out but not leaving, I wonder, and comment. “Let's see what's happening!”, she suggests. We move out, and indeed, fireworks at the end of the show fired from the school on the other side of the Barbican's internal lake. It's pretty, how appropriate, how romantic, maybe I should actually plan things like that and introduce fireworks as part of the routine. I stand a few centimetres behind her as she leans against a low lying circular concrete shrubs container. An invisible ‘kiss now’ sign lights up in the

distance. I hesitate. Too cheesy. Too early. We haven't finished our second drink. I look sideways at her. Can't tell if she feels the tension. I hesitate, and do nothing. There are more fireworks, I need a drink, can't have a drink, move my right hands behind her back and land. She moves sideways a couple of centimetres. I'm not too surprised. OK I think, too obvious, or too early. Fireworks continue.

We move back inside to see the bar has closed, it's time to move on to a regular pub. We leave the concrete fortress and down the medieval cobbled back streets of Smithfield, I suggest a pub, the Piccolo, it's called, allegedly named after a previous patron who had something to do with music. The downstairs only has four tables, higher ceiling than depth, she doesn't want to go upstairs, "just another one," she says, "it's fine here." We sit, I get some beers. She's on her phone. It goes back into her handbag before I have time to sit. Very polite.

I sit down. There's a brief interruption, has the chatter box dried up? Am I going to run out of ideas? Thankfully she starts again before the silence has time to gain too much weight. "This poster is really cool", she says, pointing behind me at a thirties style advertisement for railway excursions from the London and North Eastern company. "You like trains?" I inquire, but no, it only reminds her of Yugoslavian poverty where you took the train for lack of cars or lack of petrol. So, no trainspotting. She doesn't know who Edward Hopper is but I tell her she'd probably like him, if she likes that poster. She then describes her last camping excursion, two years previous. This is not too alluring. I stare at her sweater and the curves it hides, and then back at her eyes, which are looking to the side, and can only have fuzzy thoughts about whether it'd be worth enduring muddy hobbies for them. I bend, extend my hand, she looks at it, pauses, moves back, and asks, "What?" I pull back. She's hard work. I think we'll concentrate on enjoying the beer and the views of natural landscapes tonight. Relaxing, she's got back to talking about the exhilarating feeling one has when waking up, getting out of a tent on a Sunday morning on a summer trip. I think mud. I think mud-fight, and I stop thinking mud fight immediately. I nod, nod again. It's like listening to the radio.

I've become quite settled when she says, "Oh my God, it's past midnight, I must go home! How far are we from High Holborn? My night bus goes through there", she asks. "Not much, I can walk you to your bus stop", I say. "That's cool, I was going to ask, let's go!" She gets up and packs, and here we are. I'm jolly, we walk along and at the next street corner, past a sympathetic lamppost, I try to kiss her again, reach her mouth which hesitatingly starts opening before she moves back, a bit, "What? Again?", we unlock and she smiles as we resume walking.

Only at the almost deserted bus stop do I try again. She's now abandoned all resistance and holds the embrace passionately enough. I feel the curves through the layers. As we break, I ask, "so, what now?" She smiles. It's starting to feel a bit cold. We warm each other up again. Two lonely people are waiting for the bus, look like they're back from some late manual work shift, the barely visible underbelly of the City machine. I'm bemused that I may be part of the irritating petting couple rather than enduring it as a spectator as customary. Or maybe the world is too busy or preoccupied to care. It starts raining gently. "Pity I'm working tomorrow" she says, softly. "You're quick after all" I say. She responds that it gets difficult to resist one's desires at that time of night. But still she is working tomorrow.

We're now alone at the bus stop after two of the wrong buses came and went. I'm now shivering. I really feel like going back into the warmth now. She looks insensitive to the elements, maybe all this camping is good training. We kiss more. "You like my curves don't you?" she says. I nod. "You're so much like the kind of guy I'm into, it was clear as soon as I saw you" she adds. A bus arrives in the distance, at last saved from the cold! A last peck and she gets on; and then disappears in the distance, smiling through the back window of the double decker.

Freezing, I race back home, not succeeding warming up. I think I've lost my keys. Damn. Scan pockets. Damn! A second scan. I find them. Get in, up home; I need to sleep.

It was a good night I think while brushing my teeth. But. There's something that doesn't compute. I should sleep on it. Should I get back to her? Not sure I could stand the chatterbox more than one entertaining evening. Do I fancy her? Yes. Not in a wow kind of way but she's all round pleasant, nice height, nice curves, would change eye colour perhaps, plain brown is plain, but really nothing I can seriously object to. Definitely could sleep with her. My dick approves the thought. Check email for distraction. No email. Check spam box. Too much spam. I go through the spam and decide to make a decision tomorrow. I play the "I can't get no sleep" song. Soothing. Go to bed.

I fail to fall asleep in a river of 'buts'. I can't pinpoint it rationally but there's something that's not there. Would I imagine her ten years ahead? No, hardly. But why not. Need to sleep. Have a wank. Thinking of her. Works well enough, and eventually fall asleep.

The sun is shining through the blinds onto the door opposite my bed. I wake up, check email and read trashy news. I don't check my online dating account. I have a decision to make. It feels more wrong than yesterday. Somehow I get into my head that she's more trouble than it's worth short

term, and that she's unthinkable enough long term. Problem with not consuming one night stands on the spot, the whole process of keeping the story on simmer feels wrong and unpleasant. An ONS with an open mind is so much better. "But she has nice curves!" objects my dick. I have second thoughts. Push back deciding and writing to her to after breakfast.

I must resolve this before I go to work, otherwise it's going to pursue me all day. No, it sounds too wrong, and she won't get any easier to dispose of if I do sleep with her. That is the decision. So I log in, write an email, telling her that I had a nice time, but that on reflection, although I don't know where she stands herself – it is usually a problem to reject people before they ask something, hence many a date ending in mutual silence. It's usually all right and likely the most polite and least unpleasant way to resolve a dead end; but this time I feel that she showed enough enthusiasm yesterday evening that I must say something even though she's not manifested herself yet – that I don't see it going somewhere between us and wish her the best.

During the transit to my desk in the office at work, my phone vibrates. I look and it's her, wrong time and I don't think I want to take it. It makes my spine shiver. I sit down and log into the office computer; tada! A voice mail on the mobile. I will process it later. When I have a moment, I listen to the message and she's just urging me to call her back, that she doesn't understand my mail. I text that I'm at work and can't talk until the evening. Then I think it may be undiplomatic, but then I don't really have anything to add to what I said earlier. Anyway the problem is at least suspended until tonight.

I get home as if carrying an invisible rucksack full of stones. I think she might be trouble to deal with. I rush upstairs and check the dating site's inbox. Two messages. From her. First one in the morning, saying she doesn't understand and I should call her, we should meet. "Why? Why? Tell me!", she writes. The second is a longer, less structured rant on the same theme. She can't possibly understand that I wouldn't want to go on, and whether I'm back from work and can I call her back urgently, from an hour ago. As I ponder, a text arrives, "are you back home?" I compose a reply, saying it's just that, I don't feel there's potential here, can't really explain. I ponder about saying directly that she is now too deep into stalker territory, we've only met once after all, she talked all night without listening to me much, even resisted me until the bus stop, and then this. Doesn't make sense and isn't sane. But I stick to a standard line, thinking that arguing with a stalker never helps, so I keep it short and to the point. Send. Two minutes later I get a text. "Why? Why? Call me!" I don't want to. Five more minutes, she calls. I don't want to take it but I do. She still remains polite if with anger in her voice. I repeat my line. "I just don't think it would work out, that's it!" She insists. "Do you just want sex? We can do that." I say, "no, it's not that, yeah that would be good, but

you need more than that and it's not gonna work.” She's looping in her rant. I struggle and I say that I must stop it there and hit the red button on the mobile as she's still talking. God, how stressful. Can't imagine the mess it would have been to get more involved. I make myself a cup of tea. The phone rings. I don't answer. A message appear. “We must talk. We must meet.” Another rant has popped up online. To which I answer, in one line, that my decision is final and could she please stop contacting me.

For several hours no signs of her, I still check my inbox, anyhow. Have I ‘won’ that battle? My dick is lamenting the missed opportunity as I go to bed. It's still wanking material somehow. Getting stuck with a stalker is a funny fantasy. I wonder if there's a fetish niche for that. I think I should ask Elisa, and check my inbox once more instead of meeting with Onan. Maybe I'm enjoying the attention. Still, I congratulate myself for having escaped entanglement in an impossible situation and having detected the warning signs that early.

At midnight, on the clock, I get a message that says, “OK, but you're making an error.” Our good friend Onan is back; with a vengeance.

Two days later, she hasn't called again. Her profile has been disabled on the site. I'm not worth stopping dating for, I think, and hope she'll find her way, surely, soon. It brought down my enthusiasm for contacting anyone new or following up conversations. I may take a little break too.

As a distraction I get off to the personals section of Gregslist, the smelly armpit of London's online dating scene. The ‘women for men’ section is thinly populated. Adverts have no pictures, or pictures of bridges, except an American BBW, that you'd rather not look at, seeking for a British accent, in her kitchen. The regulatory contingent looking for a trustworthy man to treat them like a lady is always there. Someone ‘22’ is looking for an adventure, probably a con, and if genuine the sort of advert where she will be drowned in replies.

The next title says “Pretty Scandinavian looking for successful businessman.” She says 26. “I'm sick of the dating scene and thought I'd try something else. I don't want to date new people at this time, I'm doing well on my own. I'm pretty, educated, and have been living in London for two years. Looking for a successful businessman for a mutually beneficial arrangement.”

I think, well, why not, I've not done that before. It sounds like a hard one to pull, budgetary issues notwithstanding, but hell, at least she probably won't stalk, you just stop paying the stipend to have her stop coming. And at 26 and pretty is enough out of my league that it may work as expected. Well,

she might not be 26 and not pretty. Whatever. Why not try? I'm not even a successful businessman, albeit even the mechanics in the grand City machinery make a very good living and I don't really know what to spend the silly bonuses on. I make some mental calculations. Shit job probably pays one or two grand a month net, I could possibly afford that as a stipend for a lady friend, for a few months at least. I do mental calculations of how it would compare with an escort budget, before telling myself it's stupid to think cost centre when I've not even met her and don't know if it will be any easier that way than with regular dating.

I dispatch a message, explaining that City guys are a pretty good approximation of successful businessmen, attaching an evasive photo, made more evasive by negative retouching, cropping and rescaling to a low resolution in an image editor, asking her if she fancies some cocktails at my expense, "including travel expenses," I add, thoughtfully.

Late delivery

“Friday is a good night”, Henry texted, and we've arranged meeting at a pub ‘round my way’ that he thinks has decent beer. It's indeed Escape Time at work, where the office empties with unusual efficiency.

The pub is comfy looking, with smoked out light brown walls, tartan patterned wallpaper, and just the right level of crowd, not empty but not too stuffed with Friday types. “Hey, am I the invisible man?”, shouts Henry from behind me. He had settled at a well camouflaged table by the door. “It's been ages, any new adventures?”, I ask as I sit down. “Grab a beer first”, he answers.

Distracted by beer logistics I forget about his story and start ranting about some work irrelevances. He has some, more interesting than mine: the second in command at his office had to move desk to the ‘wrong’ side of the room, having been outmanoeuvred by some other middle management guys, and being close to losing their command, “in both senses of the word” he adds. I can but ponder “so this thing about charity office politics being more ruthless than the greedy sector is true?” He confirms that it seems the case to him, “Jesus syndrome!”

“And your story?”, I suddenly remember. He hums, says it's not that interesting. I insist. It's bound to be super interesting.

“So, I had that date from that site you sent me to,” he commences, “she didn't sound very special, but looked OK sounded OK, seemed positive so within a couple of messages I asked her out. She was indeed OK. We met in a pub near work, you know the one with multicoloured transparent plastic lampshades?” I ask if he means the hipster one. “One of, you know which I mean, there's hardly any non-hipster places round there”, he says. He continues the tale, he arrived at the same time as the girl, she seemed a bit nervous, but not overly so, probably as much as him, albeit he got relaxed after the first beer. Also he had a cold, with coughing, which he thought disabled him from taking any initiative, but had the advantage of making him more relaxed, it takes that pressure off. So they have a pretty normal if not exciting conversation, job and stuff; she's 33, an accountant in local government, and looks suitably understated but would be fairly pretty if she

tried. She works for the borough council somewhere in South London he can't remember. "You so often fail to remember South London that it may one day cease to exist," I point out. So they kept on chatting. After a couple of hours they needed to move table because a large group was taking over from the adjacent tables. They moved to a corner spot, "with no hindsight, on my part at least" and there he was sitting next to her. The conversation stalled a bit, she was just looking at him intensely. "I couldn't help thinking she was doing a kiss-me look, so despite the cough I tried. She showed none of the usual etiquette resistance you normally get, she was perhaps a little hesitant in her manners but not in her intent." He then explains that it didn't last five minutes, before she said, in a mellow voice, "do we go to yours?" I exclaim "God, that's quick, never happens to me that!"

He was surprised too, and coughing. Still, after finishing their drinks he agreed to take her home. It didn't slow down much, and soon after arriving they were on his bed, and he was taking her shirt off. As they unlocked from a kiss she sat back, signed him to pause, looked at him, and said, hesitantly, "I'm a virgin."

"You're kidding me!", I say. "Well do you think I could make that up? And I have no virgin fetish mind you, it sounds like a lot of hassle." But he then continues that it wasn't that much hassle with her, but still weird. You couldn't tell anyway, she had obviously discovered masturbation and toys, "so no medieval blood drawing?" He answers, "Nope, thank god, though bizarrely she had a bleeding finger afterwards after cutting herself reading one of my magazines with too sharp pages." He says it was a bit awkward but she had no problem coming, actually a bit early while he was down on her. "Could she have made it up?" I ask. "Possibly but I don't see why she would. She seemed more embarrassed about it than anything else, had just started online dating, sometimes life just doesn't happen if you're not chasing it. I can imagine the good geeky girl, not going out much, snorkelling through school and Uni being a good student and not mixing much with the in-crowd, then staid old or female work colleagues; then throw in some above average shyness and very little booze, never following up on offers that there might have been, and here you are, you reach thirty unconsumed. It happens to geek boys all the time, with the added disadvantage of no passive strategy to fall back on. She's not even ugly or anything, actually she has a really shapely body, but wears some M&S clothes and a restrained attitude and it doesn't have the same power as that of girls who use all their attributes to max effect." I tell him that I like the concept of M&S as a purveyor of chastity wares. "By appointment to her majesty", he chimes in, and continues with a story about his niece, who, at 20, can both be the sexy thing whose cleavage turns heads in the street – she gets chavs spontaneously volunteering their phone numbers – and the next day wear lousy clothes and

grow a solid moustache – she stems from a hairy family – and have no one bothering her at all. “And it's not even that she has sizeable tits, she's a B or something, it's all a bra miracle.”

“But, back to your conquest, are you marrying the girl who has waited for you for all her life?”, I sneer. He replies that he met her a second time, which was pretty much like the first, businesslike dialogue, then quickly go to bed, and then go home in the morning. It didn't spark, one of those who's okay, but you couldn't be arsed to stay, and besides she seemed at a watershed stage of her life, moving on from her old too settled life, going out more, and where she's on a journey towards a new self. He felt like he could have been her coach, but not her lover, being himself elsewhere in his life. And so he dispatched her the next day by email, trying to be as sensitive as possible. She took it well, apparently, they could almost be friends; if they had anything to say to each other that is. I remark that it all makes very much sense, it's all eminently sensible, perhaps too much. “Has reason taken over your life?”, I ask. He immediately denies, arguing that reason is the death of passion. “Isn't that what Paradise thing is about? Lots of human endeavours are really about killing passion, I suspect.” He denies firmly, “life is about ordering the next beer.”

After the refill, I entertain him with my stalker girl story. “That's fun. Stalking-Lite, you get the thrill without someone camping two years in front of your door”, he says. “You want her number?”, I ask. He smiles.

And then we forget women for a while, and get enthralled in an argument about the morality of vegetarianism, which is cut short when I venture into the quicksands of factory farming and run out of common sense. My usually unassailable certitudes are shaken, “you just couldn't be arsed to be a vegetarian, which is fair enough”, he concludes, “but then would you go out of your way to buy meat if the only shop was in Dagenham? Clearly no.” And I thus must admit defeat.

The landlord – or whoever is in charge, he has landlord manners, late fifties, balding, remaining grey crown, the eyes of someone who has seen many alcoholics but never became one – signals it may well soon be time to vacate the premises. He's kept to old fashioned times since the relaxing of the licensing laws, “I don't think he needs to close at eleven, I think he would close at ten if he thought he could get away with it, but he knows his ales”, says Henry. There's only a handful of people left, a couple composed of a tired looking sixty something chap and a faded wife character that may have been a trophy wife many moons ago, but is now not managing to hide her years below the new clothes and thick layers of make up. A bit further away, media types from Clerkenwell, mid thirties, getting a bit tipsy, but not having

lost their dignity, yet, and then a couple of early twenty somethings, rock uniforms, about whom I can't fathom how they escaped from Camden. And then a lonely middle aged guy, unbuttoned shirt, suit and braces, seemingly having a painful argument on, or with, his mobile.

“Do you know the place opposite? Is this that Japanese videogame place I've read about in Timeout?” he asks. I confirm, and here we are crossing the deserted street and entering opposite. Some Japanese looking posters, some eighties gaming consoles, dark walls, cubical furnishings, patterned orange backlights behind the bottles. It's a bit lazy but it works. It's trendy, but the people seem regular with mere aspirations of trendiness. Maybe that's where the Camden couple escaped from. We get some whisky and coke. The waitress looks subtly vulgar, as in beyond that invisible class barrier that criss-crosses British society from Lands' End to John O'Groats, a bra one size too small, which overflows in an unrefined manner, and unlikely ironically; mid-length excessively straightened black hair, a white shirt that lets the bra show through the buttons – there must be a side-blouse bra watching niche fetish somewhere on the Internet – but there's still bizarrely something sexy to the whole mismatched package. I remark that to Henry, who says “you just have a barmaid fetish, the power of the master of the drink, or something, or just the demographic.”

We settle down and Henry notes that the gaming poster is like just a distorted version of socialist realism. “2100 socialist realism perhaps”, I find it more like possibly a flyer for an underground movement, perhaps an anti-fascist demo, “It's so pleasant sometimes not to understand the text, you can give it any meaning you want” he says. I reply that you're then constrained by the limits of your imagination, which may be a sparsely furnished room for some people. “Perhaps one needs a retreat in a wordless words forest or seaside hut from time to time,” he remarks, “I suspect that's to some degree what holidays are for, why do you think everybody ‘loves to travel’ to exotic places?” I note that's spoiled by being able to watch CNN or the BBC in every hotel room in the world, but then, maybe enough exoticism is procured from the outside signage being free of meaning.

Henry looks up, into the vague distance, and gets unusually alert: “Look at that! Some group of kids are going downstairs, there might be more than a toilet there after all.” We get up, and down, and find that there's some sort of club room, sans DJ, and sans crowd, apart from the kids who just came down. With some bar stools in the corner, three of them. The bar is manned though. “Yeah, I know, you like the barmaid”, says Henry, before we settle on the stools. “The automated DJ is not half bad,” I note, to the sound of some hard to place pop with an hint of sophistication that's unexpected and presumably accidental.

"This is all very well but I need a smoke," he declares and we move out, on the narrow pavement in front of the door. It's been raining and the wet tarmac reflects faintly the image of the meat market, all Portland stone and classical orders, in an incongruous but peaceful match with the row of trailers in front of them. "Hey", says Henry, which brings me back to the more immediate scenery. He's talking to a late twenties or early thirties tall girl. She seems to belong in a shopping mall, brown hair, delightful nose, but seems to wear more life on her face than her years suggest, or maybe she just smokes a lot, I muse as she draws on her cigarette.

"And what do you do?" she says towards me, after being done with the exchange of peripheral career and location information with Henry. "I'm a cloud archaeologist", I hear myself say without really knowing where it comes from. Henry immediately chimes in, "You should see their lab, they have medieval cloud formation in formaldehyde bottles, it's wonderful." The girl looks bemused, and says it sounds cool. "Is it a government thing?" He continues, with more imagination than I have, that it's part of the Home Office, and how ancient cloud pattern had such an influential role in English history. I ponder if we're getting away with this as a shorter girl who's obviously a mate of the other, just blonder, with a lighter but still present sense of weariness, joins in. "And what do you do?" I say, trying to land before Henry crashes my professional plane into a palaeolithic nonsense cliff.

She's a cook, and from Norway. That's a tick for bloneness, but the rest is more matching northern English market town stereotypes, which Henry would no doubt demolish if we could talk. Maybe I should text him. Actually he has stopped talking, and we just listen, chiming in on odd numbered sentences, as they tell us of some excursion they did earlier today to Oxford Street. "I so love Primark", tells the taller one, nodded on by Norwegian Cook. She's smiley and jumpy, as much as Henry is sleepy. "You're all right?", I ask him. "Need to go home I think, it's my bedtime. I've had enough drink for today", he says uncharacteristically. I wonder if he hates Primark so much, but he had seemed tired, in a jolly way, all evening. I ponder if they'll ask his number, or him theirs. I think there's a potential ticket, but he just disappears, slowly but soundly, towards the night bus stop round the corner.

I realise I'm still awake but, when I look into my drink, one third left, that I'm not going to manage remaining in an upright position if I drink any more. I just want to push it out of sight. I look up, the taller of the girls has gone back inside, and the cook is finishing telling me enthusiastically about how her friend is extraordinary at coping, as a single mum with three kids. That explains the weariness. "And you have some of your own?" I ask. She doesn't. She asks back, no, and then she manages to make me talk. Thankfully I am able to deflect inquiries into the cloudy profession, and she smiles back as I

tell her some, not even invented this time, miscellany trivialities.

“Come back in,” shouts her friend from beyond the doorstep. “I’m coming,” the Norwegian Cook answers, and she pauses. “Really nice to meet you”, she looks at me intensively, moves forward, and kisses me on the mouth, holding for a long second. She moves back, “come back in and join us, if you want”, she says, before disappearing inside.

I look at my drink, at the pavement, it started raining very faintly since I last noticed the environment. I look at the truck trailers by the meat market. The resident red beret ghost is walking in the distance, as if on a round that never ends, I look back at my drink, still a third left. She's not that cute but definitely attractive enough for tonight. I look back, pavement, Portland stone, the red beret has now disappeared beyond the corner; and I walk away.

As I reach home and lie on my bed, the ceiling is turning. But then settles, and then I can go and have a pee, have a glass of water, and think, “Idiot!”

Junior miners

I've got a reply from Gregslist's pretty Scandinavian looking for an arrangement. I'm surprised she hasn't been drowned in offers. She asks for a less elusive photo. The tone of her mail confirms my initial impression of her being an amateur. It doesn't feel like a well honed script. Moreover if I were a customer, she shouldn't be that picky about my looks. Whatever, a bit more light should not reveal so unappealing a picture that I don't pass, and so I send a less evasive picture.

The answer comes a few hours later. I've passed the test. She's enclosed a single picture of her, the background looks like somewhere in Italy, so typical of profiles, beyond perhaps the 'me in my kitchen' – which has always bemused me; how after decades of female liberation so many women feel the need to advertise themselves so near their pans and pots. She looks petite, brunette, shapely, probably a pretty face, but the paucity of pixels makes it hard to tell. Jeans, trainers and slightly too loose light green top that doesn't reveal much on shape. Probably pretty enough, I think, albeit without being overwhelmed with enthusiasm. I still think it's worth a shot, for experiential value if nothing else. I think budget, let's say 3 cocktails, at say 7 quid each times two, 42 quid, give her 20 quid for the taxi back home and I shouldn't be ruined. And I sometimes end up paying for drinks, depending on whether the girls insist on sharing, for 'normal' dates too. But then they usually pay for their transport given that I live in central London and they usually don't. Guess that's an advantage of the custom they have of letting the bloke pick the place – is that another failing of the emancipation movement?

We've agreed to meet at a bar at the vaguely posh end of the scale, a few streets away from home, at the edge of my usual patch. As I'm about to leave, she calls, "I'm not ready, do you mind if I arrive half an hour late?" No problem, I explain, that I've not left, because I leave nearby, while she is somewhere Pimlico way, she says. That's posh enough for a student type, I ponder. I wonder what sort of things she must do to be 'ready'. Last minute full wax maybe? I don't expect to take her home tonight. Tons of makeup so that I don't see her? Whatever. I kill time on Google, ending up reading an article on the bar owner's business story – it was his first bar, don't run a small business without a business associate he says, his mates cut the planks

themselves, a usual rag to riches story, though not quite rags, he started middle class, and not obvious riches, he's not Richard Branson yet. He doesn't tell if he got laid in the adventures, you'd expect plenty of opportunities between patrons and subordinates in a cocktail bar.

After she called again to announce she was finally ready but would be an extra twenty minutes late, I finally depart for the bar. She arrives within 2 minutes of me sitting down, "was good timing after all", I say, smiling. She sits down. Cuter than the picture, the nice kind of petite, as far as I can see having had only the briefest of moments to glance at her before she sat down. Maybe we need bars where the girls' side of the table is transparent. We exchange usual pleasantries. While we chat mindlessly I can't fathom what all that preparation work was for, it's tasteful in a bourgeois kind of way, no cleavage, not that there would be much to show, no risqué anything, evening out clothes that shouldn't warrant much preparation. Some make up, but not overdone as far as I can tell, but I have no idea how much work that is after all. She doesn't seem the full wax type, and the prospect of homecoming seems solidly unlikely. The mystery shall remain, as I ask, "so, what brought you to London?", thinking maybe I can allow myself to be lazy and boring tonight.

She's from Denmark, followed in the footsteps of her elder sister who spent a year on an university exchange. She took over her room, and then enjoyed it enough to think of doing a master's degree. Which subject, I ask? Marketing studies. Oh well, maybe this is practical. How did she pick that most momentous of subjects? She likes to talk to people and the kind of jobs you can do afterwards is pretty open ended. "Maybe you'll work in this area soon, it's full of advertising media types round these parts." She wouldn't mind, nice part of town, she says. She asks what I do, and doesn't seem particularly disappointed with the idea that City minions get paid generously enough to get the same level as a moderately successful small time businessman, perhaps one owning a small chain of laundrettes. As luck would have it, we've finished our first cocktails and I can order a refill.

The chit chat is pleasant, and, I slowly realise, pretty much the same as one I would have with a normal date, perhaps slightly more relaxed. Neither of us mentions or even evokes the arrangement at all. It's difficult to see how this could work without any negotiating. As the second drink progresses, I start thinking that going home might not be that far fetched, although it seems very clear by now she is indeed an amateur, despite us not talking about her preceding experiences, or lack thereof, in the field.

The next bar, strategically closer to mine, is not very full, and she settles contentedly at a table with a corner sofa. She seems to actually enjoy herself,

and with the help of a Bloody Mary, starts taking over the conversation. The merits of Danish design, how even public places and government offices are tastefully decorated. I also learn about her trip to Sicily, with her sister again, and her friend Danny, which she highly recommends. "You didn't even get mugged or hassled?", I ask. No, beyond some flirty waiters and they were only hitting on her friend, who is the bombshell, but she's getting married next year, and was totally unfazed by the Latin charm offensive. "Hey boyfriend was there?" I ask. No, he was finishing his Ph.D in the States.

She isn't sure she'd like to get married but it looks like the ceremony should be great fun. "Must be stressful for the bride and groom," I comment, "the pressure, the requirement to have fun, perhaps the turning point if they've not pre-digested it, and then some anti-climax." I ask if they're getting married for a functional reason like passport or taxes. "No, true love, I think" she says with only a slight pause. "How quaint!" I remark. "You wouldn't marry for love? It might not be absolutely necessary but it's sweet" she says. "No doubt on the sweetness element, but I don't think there's much to like about the institution, basically you're telling someone, that okay, you promise to stay with them even if they stop liking you, or you them. What kind of deal is that? If you stop liking someone permanently, why stay with them? It doesn't make sense for any of the parties." She replies, "well, aren't you supposed to marry someone you love, or at least like a bit?" I explain that, yes, but that's at the time you do it, "Can a 25 year old really predict what they will feel in advance for the next 50 years? Many believe they can, and when one is sufficiently besotted one will sincerely believe the current state of bliss will last forever, I can even imagine believing that myself possibly, if I switch off my rational self, which knows that I can't predict my feelings. Nobody can control their feelings, it's often difficult enough in real time, let alone decades in advance. It's a trick our body plays on us. We need to breed and we are programmed to take care of our offspring as couples, we're monogamous animals, so there's some biology that makes couples stick together for a while. When it works well it can indeed work decades, but if you observe what happens, it's very often shorter. Two months, two years, even ten years, which can pretty much already be a very successful relationship, but still well below the lifetime thing, at least these days when most people make it to 70 plus. The biological bond just wears off and stops working after a while. So your body offers a coupling mechanism but tricks you into believing it's for eternity. It makes sense if you look through evolutionary lenses: if people didn't believe they'd stay together until their offspring are at the breeding stage themselves, which was pretty much eternity before the 20th century, when surviving way past 40 wasn't the rule, they would just be terrified of reproduction. The body tricks you into thinking you'll keep on liking the parent of your kids, and pre-scientific human societies have grafted an institution modelled on that trick, and not

on the long term reality. So people entangle themselves in all kinds of unhappiness, so called 'committing' to control things they can't control. To some extent every marriage is an arranged marriage: the 25 year old is arranging who their 45 year old self will be with, and God knows that 25 year olds have no idea about life in general, let alone middle aged life. The institution has an assumption of continuity that people at a fixed point in time are fully in charge of their future selves, or past ones for that matter, which is also retarded." I pause for breath. "Sorry I'm lecturing too much." She pauses for a moment. "Well, interesting theory, I never thought of it like that. I don't think Danny is thinking of it like that either", she laughs, and I promptly order another drink to try to drown the lecture away, and remind myself I'm not actually on a regular date.

As the discussion streamed back to the safe haven of musical taste, well me listening to her love of Brit pop with a hint of Scandinavian celebrities, none of which are illustrious to me, I find it might actually be time to try to kiss her. The corner sofa just requires bending a bit, and with a bit of signalling she seems totally unsurprised, holds but keeps her mouth firmly shut. We're reduced to some not unpleasant if also faintly frustrating, pecking session. I get used to it, lean on her, and think it's not going to go anywhere tonight after all. She's cute. She has no tits. Could I really contemplate paying for something as flat as the continental Siberian plain, I half think, as I'm listening to her relaxed ditherings, about, about, something I have stopped following, which seems to have to do with shopping and how to pick the best sales days after Christmas.

I've had enough drink by now, she seems content. Time to get home, I think, with or without her. We depart, I pay, she puts her coat on. We kiss outside, her mouth remains stubbornly shut. I don't even ask anything, and just suggest she gets a cab, there's a row waiting near. I take a 20 quid note out of my wallet and give it to her, she smiles, and her eyes shine, I can almost see the pound signs rolling in them; we say goodbye, if it was a regular, open mouth so to say, date, it'd be very positive. "See you", I turn, don't turn back, won't turn back, and I walk back home.

As I check my email, there's one from Henry, who I had told about what I was doing tonight, "hilarious! tell me how it goes!" I reply saying that it was much like a regular date, less the obstinately closed mouth, and I didn't manage to introduce the arrangement side of things, and think that I doubt I can contemplate getting into financial commitments due to the lack of curvature, and that this can only get worse when I get sober. I continue that as an evening it was fair value for money, it has cost me only the twenty quid taxi allowance on top of regular drinks, which divided by the 5 hours the date lasted does not even make the minimum wage for her. Delightful

amateurs. On the other hand she seemed to have enjoyed herself, which isn't proper work.

As I brush my teeth it seems clear that this experience will probably stay there, which is a rare moment of clarity. I can't usually make sense of things before the hangover has been properly gone through. Before checking out for the night, there's an answer from Henry, "Silly boy! You should have made her an offer for going upstairs, there and then. And for later on, you could always include a boob job in the package!" And at the same time comes a text from the girl: "I'm back home, was great to meet you! See you soon, xx."

The walk of shame

The reminder email from the organiser is opportune, I had almost forgotten I booked myself into a 'singles event' tonight. Some company that also does speed dating, found them on the web. It's a walk along Camden canal, with some historical commentary. It seems easy, 2-3 hours is not too big a commitment and you could easily leave at any point if it was really crap. I wonder what the crowd is going to be like. It seems a better idea than those singles holidays where you're stuck with a dozen or so random people with no possible rotation for a week or a weekend, which is too long if they're crap, and also too long if there's actually someone you like – you'd want to escape the in-your-face context. Many organised non-singles events or holidays have more than their statistically relevant proportion of singles, given that couples and families tend to entertain each other, though you do get age mismatches there, but that's not really enough to save the singles holidays concept.

Like all the singles events promoters, these guys boast that you can meet 'like-minded' people. In what way though? Age, singleness, and the ability to pay the fee is really weak. Hole meet stick, we're so alike! And it's not even new-age communion in humanity. Anyway, I try to tell myself I should stop complaining about quotidian mediocrity when there's no escape route being considered.

I look up the meeting point on the web, try to find some clean clothes that are vaguely appropriate just in case, and depart, rushing to catch the tube to avoid being too late and missing the start. I emerge from the tube station, the group is there outside. Hmm. Everybody looks odd, as a group and individually. Blokes on their own, excepted that group of three, leaning on the railings. A tall young guy is the organiser. Another Aussie student type, who does have an Aussie accent. I check in, I'm on the list, thankfully we don't get to walk around with a name badge and a rating clipboard. We wait ten more minutes. There's no bar to escape to. I need a drink. I scan the fellow detainees, for it looks a bit like that, almost like we're going to do community service. I look at two younger women, probably at the start of the 25-40 age range, but they're already ugly; one a bit short and fat, trainers, D&G t-shirt, blue jeans, tight enough to emphasise the triple fat roll on her

stomach. Some tits but fails the tits-bigger-than-belly test by a fair margin. Her friend is skinnier, taller, but with angular features, and a large and misshapen nose that seems like God had a really bad day when he made her. And they look thick, we'll see if they're actually lawyers or something. Next to her there's a large Caribbean mama, actually not that large yet, but that you expect her to get so later. She's on the wrong side of average, clothed on the wrong side of ill-fitting, with a bra seemingly sized to demonstrate the classic quadruple boobs effect. An almost normal guy is next to her, not talking, looking awkward, like all of us I guess, jeans and one of those Billabong t-shirts. A style error is a moderate sin here. I look to my right, a brunette, not that pretty anymore but not too unpleasant either, oval face with no offending traits, probably within the acceptable spectrum. A pleasant jacket, a tartan skirt and black tights, I almost like her – it's all relative, after all, and she's outstanding compared to the rest – and I attempt a “hi!”

She smiles back and we get into a conversation. No, it's her first time here. It's nice to break the initial awkwardness and the affair would be going pretty well, were it not that opening her mouth revealed an exceptionally mismatched set of teeth, misshapen and yellowed by smoke, who seem in a worse state than a Vietnamese village after a Napalm bombing. Are there no dentists where she comes from? I ask where she's from. She's from Moldavia. OK, there might be few dentists there, I surmise.

We're interrupted by the tour leader starting to lead us away towards the canal, a couple of hundred yards down the road. We go down stairs by the bridge and start walking. First stop, he races through the history of the canal's construction, with a distinct lack of interest, and some facts and dates I doubt the veracity or accuracy of. He seems distinctly uninterested in his topic, taking it as a too thinly disguised excuse for the walk. Which it is, but nonetheless, I can't help thinking they should have found someone who can recite a Wikipedia article with more brio.

We start and move on. Quickly three of the girls in front of me are clustering around one of the more attractive guys. Looking around it seems like speed dating inverted, the girls are a bit of a freak show, we guys can shine by being merely average. Perhaps this is the thing girls who don't have the confidence to do speed dating go to. The one next to me is not half bad, “hello” I say tentatively. She smiles back and we start a conversation. She works for Kellogg's, in accounts. On second looks she has a *je ne sais quoi* of unattractiveness to her face, some asymmetry or blunt traits; hard to pinpoint. An unfortunately too-tightly-buttoned shirt hides what might be nice curves and she's otherwise of an unremarkable but not unpleasant shape. From Birmingham, she finds it difficult to meet new people in London. “What's wrong with old people?” I jest, she gets it and smiles back she doesn't

want to be a gold digger running after dying millionaires, yet. "That's an idea I might steal, but I see no heiress here" I tell her as we stop and our host tells us a story about this bridge having been used as a meeting point for a Duke and his mistress in 1832, which frankly feels completely made up.

When we start walking again, my accountant is talking with some other girl, and they move into a rare free slot in the courtier cloud that is following the one proper handsome guy.

I talk with some of the normal, yet here outstanding compared to our female company, guys about the torrid rain last week and how it might have, or not, inundated the towpath. One of them works for the BBC, but, a techie, he denies being an undercover journalist, like the one at my first speed dating. I tell him that story. Two of them have been speed dating too, it's fun, but no result either. Some comfort is always to be found in the misfortune of others, I think to myself, trying to kill the thought I'm as good at aphorisms as Oscar Wilde.

I think we're getting close to our end point, and I'm talking to a short girl, of an oddly amorphous shape, despite the fact she couldn't really be said to be obese. Crooked and yellow teeth and a rugged skin are testimony to a lifetime commitment to the prosperity of the tobacco industry. She offers one as she lights up hers. I decline. Two kids, she's a cook. She seems very clearly keen. We cover the bases, the weather, London, first time doing this. She touches my back with her hands as she points to the reflection of a house in the still canal water, whose dark openings make eyes in the image of a bird created by the mirror image. Too forward or too damaged, I'm not sure why but no way I can do her, even casual, I think to myself.

Thankfully I don't need to find excuses to get rid of her as we arrive at the final stop, a bar with pub-style food. Booze at last, it has been odd to go through all this in perfect sobriety. We get in and there seem to be other large groups of people, most of which are equipped with beautiful people, or at least average enough to surpass our set of rejects. We settle in our booked corner, and I try to forget that everybody else in this town now seem more desirable than the present company. The beer is welcome though. I sit next to the BBC guy, and we get into whether streaming or the iTunes model will prevail in the future as a way to distribute music. He thinks vinyl will have its place. I contend that object fetishism notwithstanding, it will safely stay below one percent of the market. I ask if he thinks the BBC will survive. He thinks so, anyway privately funded broadcasters should fail first. "Broadcast still has a future," he commences before being interrupted by a group of twenty noisy local teenage boys scurrying past the pub. He remarks that teenage boys have probably been invented by the vasectomy industry. He has

trouble understanding how anyone can look at them and think “I want one of those to call mine.” I suggest the pharma industry might come up with some treatment to extinguish the hormonal bonfires, so he should keep trying. “Not tonight, though”, he says, amusing both of us.

After a while, the BBC guy is gone and the conversation has slackened into gentle nothingness. I depart on excuses of other commitments, as the remaining participants seem to enjoy themselves after all, though I doubt any couple is going to come out of this. The attractive guy is gone and the level of flirtatiousness seems to have sunk despite the introduction of booze. It's more like everybody has discovered a long forgotten ugly cousin.

Once home I check my email, there's one from Petro, which reminds me I should tell him the Gregslist girl story and he may want to give her a try. It sounds like an arrangement that could work out for him. And her, possibly, though maybe she won't like someone like Petro. Next some reply on the newspaper's dating site. As I open it, it reads “Hello, serial dater, how have you been doing?” Good one! Checking her profile again – I tend to forget people I approach quickly, which given that most of them won't ever reply may be justified – I see that she had a shady but stylish photo that didn't show her face and only hints of her body, but she had a better than average profile, free of the usual clichés. Now I can see the private pictures she makes available to people she replies to, it turns out we've indeed dated already, some time last year; she was okay, and actually works for the newspaper in question, and so gets a free account on the site. I had complained to her that for a left wing paper they used predatory pricing and happily exploited people's misery, to which she had nodded, depriving me of a nice argument, saying the man in charge is indeed a bit of a tosser. We exchanged a couple of non-committal emails afterwards, but neither of us was serious enough to arrange meeting again, although I can't remember if it was she or I who stopped writing first. I couldn't stop thinking she'd make a good partner for my colleague Will, which is no good. I trust it's not worth resurrecting, given it never felt right in the first place, despite thoughts of her being leagues ahead of today's cook prodding me into reconsidering, ever so briefly. It's all relative after all.

No sex

"I'm in London this weekend, Wednesday?" was the surprise message from MetaphysicalToothbrush that I found in my mailbox yesterday. She looks interesting but far fetched. Ten years younger, too many occult interests from what one can guess from the directions in her profile – I guess I must be of the right astrological sign for her to write. She's in the distance on one of the photos, sitting on a multicoloured painted staircase, each step being a drawn piano key, rainbow coloured up the hill, must be somewhere in South America. She's clearly not fat, and could be cute, or not. We've been toing and froing for a week or so, and sort of hit it on, and maybe I can tolerate the occult after all, and who knows she might tolerate rational. Isn't love blind? Maybe complementary can be a match sometimes. She is not even living in the UK at the moment, but will land in September for a course, but she said she might visit before then and here she is. Maybe she just wants a distraction, although she sounds like the busy type with a bench of friends in every major capital who doesn't need the random guy from the Internet for a chat, or a quickie. Anyway I would be pleased to do distraction. I ponder if that's a case of a school night that might allow a conclusion, despite her not having kids.

I booked her at the small corner pub nearby, I can't be arsed to find new date locations these days, maybe I should get a frequent flyer card. I'm five minutes late and she's not there. Or at least I think she's not there. There's one girl at a small table by the window upstairs, who could possibly be her. Dark hair, similar stature, but her clothing is a bit too mainstream for my expectations, and her facial expression also hints at a more settled life than that of my date. Two wine glasses, one empty, one almost empty, what to do? Ask her in error, and be embarrassed, or wait. I go back down, order my own drink at the bar, and can always get up if no-one else appears.

Fifteen minutes on, no-one else has appeared. I think about checking the girl upstairs. Then she comes down, with a boyfriend-like figure, so the second glass was indeed his. I sit back down, maybe mine will never come. I text her and then get a newspaper. I hate waiting for dates, not for the waiting as such but because it maximises the silly pre-date nervousness. Try to read and can't concentrate. Tada. She's texted back, tube delays, okay, she's round the

corner.

When she appears my preconceptions are vindicated. She looks more the part, stylish woollen shawl that unfortunately hides any possible down-blouse angle, a mischievous smile, a cute, youthful, almost adolescent face, complete with some faint traces of hormonal fireworks, but pleasant nonetheless, on the short side but must be teasing the five feet. I like what I'm seeing; hello, she sits down and starts talking unstoppably. She puts up her sleeve, uncovering some unusually furry arms, bit yucky that, but nobody is perfect, and it's much easier to fix that than a bent nose or a smashed up face. I can forgive her, I gather. She's talking about a smelly man on the tube, "fat and content of his middle class misery, which makes it more pungent, he didn't say anything but emanated tosser waves that filled half the carriage" she explains. She then talks of the hassle she got at customs yesterday, even though she's on a Lebanese passport which is not usually a problem; I suggest a customs officer had a bad day, she replies it's probably some Tory initiative to keep the riff raff out of the country. I suggest that most of the riff raff was born here anyway. She lost her luggage but the counter staff was nice, and she actually didn't mind, and they found it, catching it just before it got dispatched in error to the Maldives.

"The Maldives might have been a location your suitcase might have enjoyed a mini-break in," I suggest, "boring place but relaxing, suitcase spa treatment? Has your suitcase travelled a lot?" She asks how I know she has a suitcase. She looks she might have one. Vintage. Yes, she owns a well travelled Rimowa, that might have been to the Maldives with her previous owner for all we know. "You're dating a divorced suitcase?" I ask. "I don't do virgins any more", she replies.

From luggage to her background, I soon learn that she had a pretty interesting route, her parents moved to Baghdad soon after she was born in Iraqi Kurdistan, flying low under Saddam. Her grandmother, then middle aged, got tortured and died soon after from the repercussions, she presumes, as they hardly ever talk about it in her family. She has memories of a relatively opulent lifestyle, her dad was a surgeon and managed to surf the minefield of being a prominent medic in a hostile regime. But they left when she was 9, off to Vienna, where she had a bit more trouble adapting. It didn't last long before she was sent to an English private school, she says as she hurriedly sips the last drops of her cocktail.

"Did you enjoy that?" I ask. She replies it was no problem. Girls-only was a bit of a hassle but then it was a good challenge to have to find ways to meet the boys from a nearby boys' school, or even the townies on occasion. She got expelled and sent back to Vienna for a couple of months for boy antics, albeit

really she got away with a lot more without getting caught. “Is that where you became bi?”, I ask, remembering her profile said so. “Nope, I resisted it at the time, my two best girlfriends were militantly bi, I think more fashion bisexuals, they're now happily married and stowed away with kids in the home counties, you could entrust them running the WI baking evening, how times change.” I nod, with a wink, “Glad you remained wild.”

“But enough about me,” she says, staring intensely and inquisitively. I want to shag her here and now but I manage to muddle along some of my life anecdotes, despite not having much to match her standard. She seems captivated nonetheless.

We're already on the third cocktail, she's on a fast one, we've wandered around some dark and light topics, in the safe harbour of current affairs and the latest fads. She's tried that latest designer drug that was in the press, “It was a bit meh, and anyway it reminded me I hate putting stuff up my nose; so I'm back to the pedestrian smoke now.” “Come on, it's almost legal, that's no fun”, I point out. “Too old to be a cool kid, and so glad as well, it was too much work.”

The table next to us are leaving, one boy, three late teenage or early twenties girls, looking alike as if they were sisters, all three the same exact average girl's height, and all equally skinny, albeit in a way that reveals a lack of exercise. Posture could do with some work or age will take a further toll. The spooky similarity extends to some blunt peaks and valleys which make their faces distinctly unattractive. Elegantly curvy backsides do not save the situation, I think, as my date, who I realise I don't know the name of, is back from the toilet, beaming invisibly without even trying. “Context is everything”, I think, and hear myself say aloud.

Quick! I need to come up with another context from that unsavoury lapse. I stutter, “eh, I was thinking of spices,” I improvise looking at a nineteenth century poster about the colonies in the distance behind her, “if you use spices in the wrong dish, that doesn't work, and you'd be better off with none at all.” She looks puzzled, says a faint yeah, and declares that we need another round.

She's holding her drinks better than I do, and I'm now in dumb contentment just listening to her, as she describes in languid detail the way she had almost single handedly dug up the statue of a Roman senator – removing one careful layer of dust after another with a thin brush – the name of which I don't really get but it sounds phonologically like a good enough cocktail. I maintain enough dignity not to ask if she found his dick, although it might have amused her, and then can't help “Does anybody asks you the obvious

question? Was he complete?" She answers that he was dressed, and "it's not Pompeii, Roman porn finds are actually few and far between, unfortunately."

I remark it's a cool thing to do for a living, to which she retorts she was only a volunteer, and never had a real job. She mostly does some random editing jobs sent by her parents or some acquaintances, and the odd acting job "but I'm crap at it" – I think it's hard to be bad at looking pretty, though arguably sometimes acting involves more than body presence, but she's talking too fast for me to go beyond nodding – and that she's never been at an office job with a schedule and salary. "Bonus ball!" I remark.

As much as I actually enjoy listening to her, I also can't help moving my head forward and my lips towards hers. She moves back slightly, for a second, says "okay", and we kiss. It's very pleasant, we part, look at each other, start again. After a few iterations she moves back and says, without me having asked anything, "Okay, I can stay at yours, but as long as we don't have sex. I get funny otherwise." I extend my hand and caress the back of her neck, "okay, no problem", I smile. I don't even mind. She's cool, I like her. And anyway I might be too drunk to fuck, as the song goes. I say so.

Half an hour later, we're sitting on my bed at home, kissing frantically, my hands reach below her top, fly past her midriff and embrace voraciously her delightfully shaped waist. We fondle, lying down, sitting, in a pause I massage her as I sit just below her backside, for some long minutes. "That's good", she moans. As we turn, the room turns a little too; I lay on my back, she cuddles on, seemingly sober. I think I pass out, ever so briefly. I come back on "You're okay?", she asks, and I moan it on. She takes my top off and kisses my tummy, perfect medicine.

We've turned, I'm now reaching for her groin area, take away her trousers; she helps naturally. Her panties are gone as swiftly, and it's the surprise of an immaculate shaved pussy that I go down on devouring. As my tongue tickles the inside of her vagina and then moves around, aims imprecisely but still seems to find its target from the sound and muscular jerks. My index fingers slides inside her hesitantly – are we perhaps breaking the 'no sex' rule? – and is washed off in natural lube. Soon after as my tongue moves to and fro between front and back doors, my index finger finds its way, like a missile on autopilot, inside her arsehole.

Her spasms and the soundtrack seem to mean she's enjoying it, she seems at the edge of coming, perhaps does come, then sighs slowly, and says "well, that's good, but wait a minute!" She lets me kiss her, and quickly relaxes back. As we kiss I wank my cock then move upright as I get closer to climax, and then splatter her mid-riff up to her tits, which I've now realised are truly

magnificent, B-cup notwithstanding.

I recover my breath and spirit. She asks for a handkerchief, and proceeds to clean up the mess, some of it, then just throws herself back on the bed and declares “sex is messy!” I guess we’ve, indistinctly, broken the rule. None of the promised upset is delivered.

“Can I check my email?” She gets up and goes up to my computer. I can’t help admiring her back, her perfect form. Her smooth body, give or take the hairy arms – “hairy arms, waxed pussy; go figure” I think silently. As she turns, her body and mischievous smile are so striking that I can’t help the thought that she has just escaped from the porn flicks that I usually play on this laptop. I’m content with myself, it’s not often that I have such guests. And I like her. The anomaly won’t last.

“Where are we?”, she asks. I explain. She doesn’t get it. “I don’t quite remember which way I came, was just following your instructions.” I point out that if you stand by the corner of my room, stand on your feet, and look up, you can see the top of St Paul’s dome on the corner of the window frame, and ask if that helps. “St Paul views from the top of the wardrobe, that would sell the place in no time, if you need an estate agent I’ll do your write-up” she says. “There’s also a roof terrace mind you, communal but still. Nonetheless I’ve stopped taking girls there as it generates such a ‘kiss me now’ vibe that it feels like you have a film crew waiting and it kills the set instantly.”

She showers, dresses swiftly, and now thinks she knows where she is. She doesn’t want breakfast downstairs. I don’t want her to go. Bye, quick kiss, the door closes. She’s gone, the film is over and I just fall back in indistinct sleepiness.

When I emerge later on I realise I still don’t know her name, and that I’m a good two hours late for work. It will be a contentedly trashed slumber day.

Crosswords

It's Saturday evening, I'm meeting Elisa out of Liverpool Street station. The day's movingly clear sky is fading gently, and there's an air of subdued joy outside of the station that is a strange break from the dreary mood London usually is in. I walk past a Big Issue salesman who stares into the distance, almost becoming part of the street lamp he's leaning on, seeming philosophically detached from the mishaps of earthly life. The hurry of the pedestrians seems subdued. Have happiness terrorists been poisoning the water supply with ecstatic pills?

Elisa is already waiting in the pub, on a lonesome back street. It's a stone's throw from the constant flow of people, yet cut from it. It's a classic pub, full of suits during the week but pleasantly domesticated now, an oasis of staid tranquillity in the city. I ask Elisa if she finds the ethos of the city particularly jolly today, or if it's just me. "It's just you, London is just it's usual preoccupied, slightly neurotic, but in the end stoically coping, self. Did you get laid perhaps?", she smirks.

"Well, yes, sort of," and I tell her the story of the girl with no name. "Hey, no problem, when you're on a date the person is in front of you, you don't need to do the register, why would you need a name? And if it gets to the stage it's embarrassing to ask later on, you can just marry her and wait for when the priest asks her name" she says. I finish off the story by relating the email I got from her yesterday, where she told me that it would be nice to meet up, as long as we don't sleep together again, if I'm OK with that. I tell Elisa that I'm not sure how to read that, did she find the experience too crap, or am I really too ugly or undesirable for her or something, or... – she cuts me "or she likes you too much and runs in the other direction." You can't know really, she says, "it could be anything, or something else we haven't thought of. Will you meet her again?" I nod, she seems interesting, and is in transit anyway; I think I won't be getting obsessive and can cope with the no-sex rule or stop seeing her if I were to slide into unrequited interest. "That's the great thing about Internet dating, you can always drop people without having to deal with the real life entanglement you get offline when it goes pear shaped." Elisa argues that's what bars are for, or clubs – "when the scene is not too incestuous" I interrupt – "or the city so small, okay, but in

London you shouldn't notionally need Internet dating, that said randoms in bars are a hassle, you get to eliminate people with shit on their profile far too late." I argue it's hard to cheat on looks, you win some, you lose some, to which she replies that for boys yes, but girls with good make up, a good bra and bad lighting can do wonders to a crowd of inebriated blokes.

"Talking of upcoming intoxication, what do you know about Stumbo?" she asks. It's the night we're going to, and I tell her that I've only heard about it from a random girl in a club, the friend of a speedhead I met and who had taken a liking for me, it seemed, but was too off his head to continue a structured conversation. The place sounded grown-up, some crossover between fetish and gay scenes, perhaps, whatever, we'll see, "with beds", she had said. Then I checked the website which doesn't tell much and could be that of some other alt or fetish night. I also googled the place it's in, an artist collective of some description, the building was some old coaching inn if they didn't make up the history, now with studios and arty events and the like. That can turn out terrible but they didn't seem too slimy pretentious on their website. She remarks that I shouldn't despair from finding nonsense even behind a front end that doesn't seem lame. I laugh, "I relent, you teach the thing after all, they're all your children really, all they do is the product of your crafty programming!" We laugh loud enough to get folks from not one but two tables to turn their heads, before going back to their beers.

"You have to be motivated for this thing", I say, as we embark on the connecting bus at London Bridge, which we waited for more than 20 minutes – that is a lot for a ten minute frequency line. "Maybe they had a nuclear incident up east", she comments. At least we're doing a bit of tourism. It's pretty clean these days, a few tired eighties office blocks, some council estates, bit battered but reasonably maintained, a couple of more recent office blocks, having escaped the worst of 1990s postmodernism, somehow. All nineteenth century industrial brick buildings seem to have been turned into posh flats, with a slight edge, though being on an economically bombed out site I don't expect much social mixing to happen – well colocation on its own is something, it gives some anchor into reality. And then we turn, probably changing postcode, into an area property developers have not quite colonised yet.

The bus has now gone on an inner zigzag path, and it takes a bumpy twenty minutes to reach our stop. "That looks like the website", says Elisa, as she points to an angled brick building's corner entrance. The bus drives a bit further, we're obviously one stop off. At least we didn't miss it altogether. We walk back up the road, and I suggest that would have been a good place for a brothel as well as a coaching inn. "You wish!" comments Elisa, "look it's got some frieze on the side wall, maybe there will be some hints of its various

uses, peripatetic or otherwise!” Getting closer it's some maritime theme, fishermen, nets, ports, which keeps us suitably mystified.

We get through the courtyard and the place seems as deserted as the streets around it. Some battered up cars. A white Ford Transit van, and a sibling repainted in amateur flashy colours, alternative art not at its best, but I guess it breaks the blandness of the streets it's parked on and greatly diminishes the chances of it getting nicked. A pile of scaffolding. “See, we're not alone!” says Elisa as she point to two shadows at the end of the dimly lit courtyard, walking behind a pile of miscellaneous mouldy spare wood planks, evoking projects perpetually suspended, towards a door with a faint red lantern hanging on its left side.

Once inside there's a desk, manned by a rotund girl in typical fetish gear, probably short – she's sitting – curly hair dyed black and arranged in a complex scaffold, dark green mini-hat and fish net, cleavage, well padded tattooed arms, in her late thirties, perhaps. I hand the twenty quid note, while Elisa is saying hello to the short but stocky guy behind the counter girl, which may play some sort of security role, I just overhear a “yeah I'm working.” He's in a suit with top hat and a riding crop in hand. She says she knows of him from a private party she went to with Matt, who held the position of boyfriend number two a year back.

Two turns through a short bendy corridor and we're into the main space, the size of a large living room. Black walls, the bar is at one end of the room, and it angles at the corner, near the door, into a DJ booth. There's just room for one DJ and perhaps a skinny assistant in there. A tall young thing is there, black vest, more tattoos, fluorescent green baseball cap, playing some eighties revival stuff, mellow to the point for the start of the evening, it's barely past midnight.

Opposite the bar there's a sign made of cut plywood letters, crudely painted in lilac that says “STUMBO!” – the name of the night. On the third wall, slightly above head level, there's a row of black and white photographic portraits with a distinct talent, I point to it and Elisa remarks “that's pretty good for underground art, definitely not been done by the guy who did the transit van.” There seems to be a grand total of 4 lighting effects, the kind you can buy from a high street electronics store, one each side of the DJ, a spotlight pointing to the disco ball, and one gobo mirror thing fixed to the wall over the door; let's hope it doesn't fall off. I tell Elisa “the light show may have been fixed up by the guy who did the transit van.” She smiles and replies, “It's not about your tools, it's what you do with them, unless they're really really small.”

“Let's take over this sofa,” she exclaims pointing to a lonesome niche which is between a speaker and the DJ booth, “it's quilted there!” We sit down, it's surprisingly quiet in this corner, and she says, “you see that doorman, he looks like a guy, or more precisely like the older brother of a guy I was seeing for a couple of months last year, while I was doing my sabbatical in Vancouver. We used to meet at his place, and the second or third time he had a new bed, with like railings which were good for getting chained and roped to – most standard fare Ikea furniture is completely devoid of hooks – and I was a bit surprised he wasn't equipped before.” I interrupt and ask if he wasn't used to that, or was he a roping virgin when he met her. She replies that he knew his stuff, but when they parted he revealed he doesn't normally invite girls to his place and does it in clubs or at her's or at a friend's fully equipped dungeon. “Sounds weird, have you broken another heart?” She thinks for a second, “no, I don't think so, we met up again at a munch about a month later and he was okay, talking all night about a new girl he'd met. And it was a very play centric thing, which reached its end pretty naturally, I think I must have seen him five times for play sessions in all. He didn't chase when I stopped asking.” I ask why she stopped, wasn't it good fun? “Yes, but it's one of those with not enough energy to sustain beyond the novelty I think. Breakfast conversation always stalled, which I mean can be cool, but here it just wasn't clicking territory. He knew his ropes though, but then I'm not the total binding fanatic, I don't want to deprive him of a proper fan.” I remark, how generous of her this is.

From our position, we do see everyone entering and exiting – well, if, nobody is actually leaving at the moment. “I like this place,” says Elisa, as a couple in perfectly matched harlequin costumes walk past. The same batch of diamond-patterned fabric has been used for both the guy's shirt and inner vest, and the girl's skirt. Yellow hat and pattern; I ponder if there's some hint of mismatch in the colour, but they'd still win the best costume of the night if there was a competition. “And you don't know half of them, after all”, I comment. She says it's better to go to places where there's some novelty, the London fetish scene can be a bit small and incestuous. “Incestuous...” I comment. She just pokes me with a bright smile, before saying “let's explore further, we haven't been through this doorway there, I think they have play rooms.”

We go through the dance floor, still deserted apart from one lone tall black girl, or is she a boy in drag, lazily jiggling around, oblivious to anyone looking at her, and past the other door. Black painted corridor, sharp angle, a door on the left, thick red curtain, Elisa has a quick look in. “Bed, nobody”, indeed a bed, some more red fabric on the wall, and tea lights, in a surprisingly spacious room compared to the main room, “no seats for spectators, they had the space”, I comment. Moving on to another room on

the side – four poster metal bed, plenty of hooks, a lone inflatable doll, sad in the corner opposite; and then at the end of the corridor the WC. Toilets and shower cubicles, luxurious equipment. Squatter-standard DIY plumbing, graffiti full metal jacket, but no decomposing body, it looks even surprisingly clean for the conceptual trashiness level. A three piece suite, brown plastic leather, still unoccupied, has been divided, a settee on one side of the door, a seat on the other, and the last one backing the urinals' partition – cool places always have a sofa in the dark matter section. “Isn't even sticky!”, says Elisa after touching it, “while we're here, I'll go and split my MDMA pill, I think it's a strong one and I want only half of that, do you want the other half?” I decline, perhaps someone should stay vaguely in charge, I suggest, although adding that even sober I'm probably less in charge than her high. “OK I do this, you do booze!” I nod and say, “diversification is your friend”, as she's already disappeared into one of the cubicles. There seems to be a semblance of gender order still.

A good hour later, the smoke machine has been put to good use, Elisa is shaking her head off on the dance floor, shining her smile around indiscriminately. I pause, as I see a free slot, beside the DJ booth, from which I can look around and marvel. The tall black girl or boy in drag has been joined by a whole cohort of obvious trannies, towering above the crowd in high heels and elongated formerly males bodies. Sequin jackets, fur neck pieces, and fishnet stockings make for visual fireworks, and creative to boot, not just fresh out of the store – unlike the more regular guy next to them, whose pink PVC suit is a bit too fresh off the wrapping. He still has the looks of someone who could work at a big four accounting firm during the day, however tightly ball-squeezing his trousers are.

A bunch of three Eastender types enter; trainers, in regulatory multicolour branded t-shirts and jeans, on top of regular muscle, except the older one who's started graduating towards the beer belly stage. They settle next to the trannies at a small standing table whose stand is made of copper pipework. I can't tell if they've already been there or are too pissed to be moved by the spectacle. One tries to chat up a tranny. She's distant and uninterested. Muscle power doesn't work. He doesn't seem to mind, laughs with his mate. They're improbably fitting in the composition. Are we in a modern day Vermeer staging?

The DJ has changed, chubby guy that must be in his fifties. Elisa knows him, and is chatting with him as I'm dancing this time. Deep harsh drone sounds, probably all from the analog electronics era, are perfect at this moment of the night. The trannies are spread around, mingling. A short, bald, very gay, very middle aged guy is absorbing the room with great intensity. Eyes closed, one small step back, one small step forward, fractal movements. I wonder

what he's on. He must have been two hours on this cycle, he was at it when the now disappeared chavs came in! Ketamine probably.

Elisa has reappeared, dancing quietly now next to me, at a right angle. I look at another girl further on the floor, skinny, mini-skirt, leggings, naked top apart from her bra. A big swastika tattoo, centered on her belly button, is covering the full width of her tummy, horizontally aligned instead of the usual diagonal arrangement. She was probably keen on rebellion in her younger days, I presume. Looking surreptitiously as she's at an angle talking to a tall guy she seems to be acquainted with, I see there's a faint grid behind the swastika, and some lines and text behind it. I think I get it: it's a crossword grid, which seems to have been added later on. The swastika just forms the black squares in the crossword, and the text does seem it could be the definitions. I guess you can play, she looks towards me, I look back at Elisa. Who smiles. I dance. My attention moves around, and then back to the girl, who, on reflection, might not be a girl. Her body has faint female forms, straight legs, tall, could be but you can't tell for sure. I ask Elisa, who doesn't get the question, and smiles. She's not going to do gender inquiry consultancy work at this time of night. The girl's skirt is short but could still hide a folded dick. Whatever. I look at her, ever so briefly. She looks at me, then moves towards me, and tells me something. I don't get it. I say "what?" Elisa smiles at her, she looks at me, I nod vaguely, she makes a head sign, says something to Elisa, who smiles, having probably understood no more than I did, and backs off. I dance bemused. Slowly it dawns on me it might have been a sign to join her in the dark room. Maybe. Maybe not. A bit fast. I'm the first to complain of women doing too much procedure but then this is perhaps too little. And I'm missing an explanatory booklet on the etiquette here. She's disappeared now, and Elisa says "Seat!" and rushes back into the sofa we started the evening in, as it has just freed itself.

We've left. A top hat and a girl as small as her heels are tall are just shades on the pavement, fading in the distance. An empty bendy bus races past. As we go towards her stop, I ask Elisa, who is quietly content and not quite back in the real world yet, if she thought I had a ticket with the swastika girl, or if she got what she said. "Which girl, no idea, I was elsewhere, but it sounds like you might have given her a chance?" I retort "Nah, I need wilderness training before I can do that." She says that it might be worth a Facebook update, or something to tell my grand children, "you could adopt some part-time just for that." I should go back to my dating alma mater. "Yeah, it's good for nothing, but for that it would work out." she says. After that she comments on how good night it was "It felt like my spiritual home, freaks and all. Even the proper guy I can forgive." I inquire about which proper, I noticed nothing, she grumbles something about middle of night and getting to Top Hat who did nothing much, but then the miscreant vaporised of his

own accord – she didn't notice him again for the rest of the night.

We walk past an MX5 with the same logo as on the t-shirt of the elderly DJ's hanging around the back mirror. “That's Eliminex's car”, says Elisa. I ask if it's the DJ she talked to. She nods. “Arizona Tina has the same one” I say. She replies, “Match!”

We're now just staring silently into the cold night at her bus stop, barely noticing when the bus does arrive. A quick hug, and she disappears into the dawn and the indistinctness of my thoughts. I just turn around, towards my own stop, exhausted, just wanting to be beamed to my bed.

High fidelity

2:30 am: I'm on a side street near Soho Square. A police car, lights on, sirens off, is parked outside the club I'm emerging from. A policewoman, in her late twenties and well padded, both by nature and due to her costume, is tempestuously explaining something to her colleagues, who seem much more relaxed and ready for a beer. She was on the dance floor ten minutes ago. Nothing of much rational relevance seems to have occurred during the whole night, I can't figure out if the eventfulness was here or elsewhere, or if the police car has been set up by London's Tourist Board to make the street lively and happening. I like the idea of the police force as a decorative prop, running around town to make it look pretty and alive. Perhaps they do that in Switzerland. Or maybe I should suggest that to the prince of a sleepy emirate next time I meet one. Pity I never meet princes; really, another good idea down the drain. The hangover is going to be painful, now I've layered clubbing mixers on top of the earlier evening wines. I wasn't meant to go clubbing tonight!

1:55 am: It's Friday, not officially a school night, but the girl says she has some nail-painting to do tomorrow at midday. Is it to get rid of me or not, who knows, it doesn't quite seem so. Quick goodbye kissing still, slightly more accomplished than the evening previous' attempts, she's playing reluctant in a nice way this time, I like this. I don't think sobriety will save her, and we'll probably leave it there. It was a fun night still, the sort of idle distraction I needed. She blathers something about a guy she's met and had a chat with when she was out for a cig for 20 minutes about an hour ago. That explains it. The story is confused, friend of ex something. Whatever. I won't call her. I go back dancing, it's a good night and too early to go, and I get another drink I really don't need.

1:10 am: "I want drugs!" says my companion, "I want drugs!" I'm not that streetwise to find anything out of the ether, even that sweaty an ether. It reminds me of that drunk girl at a festival who wanted me to open her beer bottle with bare hands – or the lighter trick? – just because I was a bloke. I wasn't even wearing a Superman t-shirt. And funny that website we met through has a 'drugs' question to which my reply of 'occasionally' got me some amount of aggro, a bit rich in a nation of binge drinkers. There is some

societal disease here that alcoholism is on a different plane as something which could be as innocent as the odd joint or quarterly pill. The repetitive rubbing makes the dancing quite fun. I'm trying to navigate against the allowed perimeter. The lady is not sleeping with people on the first date and I think she'll keep to her word, at least tonight and with me. Which I don't mind. Really. I mean, really.

0:30 am: The taxi driver didn't know about Hi-Visibility. How come? Isn't he supposed to have The Knowledge? For once there's a service, of sorts, profession in England where they get more than twenty minutes training, here is one who does not know about one of the most famous gay clubs in Soho! We arrive nonetheless. How funny, I go out with a random from the Internet, and she likes gay clubs. No surprise we're still single. And it's the second one this week, Monday Date was the same, and eastern European as well, go figure. Had I known I'd have chosen a place to meet nearer town rather than next to home, and not drunk wine all evening. Single life is so hard. I mean it's the sort of problem heart surgeons, with their tidy cottages in Buckinghamshire, never have. The best part of the club must be that long corridor of circles and stars cut out of plywood panels and backlit through white plastic. Neat work, and repeats downstairs. Girls pay more, I didn't know that, first time I'm there not doing merely autistic clubbing. Reverse sexism, that's jolly; glad it hasn't fallen foul of sex equality rules, or perhaps the minister in charge hasn't been told. Do trannies get in for free? That will remain unresolved. I disburse the extra two quid, and we get in.

11:30 pm: We're switching bar to the Japanese place opposite and to mixers. It's quite empty. It's a weekend night and not a bad area and London's already dead. This town is sick. She's skipped any pretence on the wine tasting aspect of the event. We had vaguely chatted about wine online, and were supposed to do a tasting despite my lack of knowledgeable knowledge. She stuck to house red all night, it's got alcohol – an easy to please girl. She's become somewhat likeable even on house white, and the night which has now come helps hide the thick, frequently refreshed on each long trip to the loo, make-up layers. So I go through the kissing motions, but nope, not now, not on first time you know. No big deal, and she doesn't run away either, I've got the hang of the routine now, including graceful exit; and there must be some decayed mutual flattery in there somewhere. Change subject to clubbing habits, perhaps we can reroute the evening.

9:45 pm: She tells me I've told her nothing about me. I've told her nothing about me. I don't like her that much, I can't be arsed. I'm way past the era when I needed to vomit my life onto any random date that was foolish enough to listen, and was saner first date material. It's not for tonight really, I like being a spongy body today. Thankfully, I manage to re-centre the

discussion on her. She doesn't seem to have a hugely interesting life, but there must be something to tell. She's not used to being the one talking she says, unique for a girl. I don't think she's being truthful, since it isn't hard to get her to talk about herself, and I'm not usually good at steering conversations or people. I feel very slightly that it's wrong to do the steering, like I'm on an assignment, the entire date is a bit too much one of those dates you feel like you're an EasyJet flight attendant repeating the security instructions. It's a tad creepy, albeit admittedly very low on the scale of creepiness, compared, to, say, genocide.

8:30 pm: She's found me at last, I was getting a bit tired of being the lonely loser at the bar, while waiting for her. She had walked past five minutes before, but I didn't recognise her enough for identification; and then she needed to call and be given explanations to find the street she had already found. Either she's not the sharpest girl in town, or I'm not the sharpest giver of oral explanations. Profile said 34, looks like it or a bit more, probably within the regulatory two or three years allowed. She's not a stunner but not a disagreeable shape either. A slight bit of tummy but otherwise dimensions are within tolerance values. Her face is a bit less nice, not ugly, but not pretty either, and really, man, that's a lot of make up. You wonder what's under it. Reality is not up to the profile pic, though I can't say it was outright fraud either. Or perhaps we should share responsibility. She's a Russian from the Ukraine, a beautician, who caters to the Russian expat community mostly, in London town for many years, and seems to scrape by okay, which is a remarkable achievement in cheery London for an ordinary girl from ex-Soviet. I wonder if the clients are mafia wives, but dare not ask. After all I don't want to know things I don't need to know. Ordinary girl really. As she gets into a story about her sister it's clear we're in no way territory, I'm not getting into a relationship with her ever. As much as I suspected from online, yet somehow I'm looking for shaggable but not doable at the very moment; so it's exactly as per requirement, but why am I doing this? I need another glass of wine.